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# RANCH ROMANCES

25¢

A FAWCETT PUBLICATION
FEBRUARY 22ND NUMBER

FEATURING
DEATH WAITS
AT DESTINY GULCH
by Kenneth L. Sinclair

FEATURING
THE VENGEANCE
RIDERS
a new serial
by Jack Barton

RANCH FLICKER TALK
By The Famous Movie And TV Star
ROB CUMMINGS

Missing page - inside front cover

31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

*SECOND JUNE NUMBER*

June 17, 1955
Volume 192, No. 2

# RANCH ROMANCES

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*ON SALE EVERY OTHER FRIDAY*


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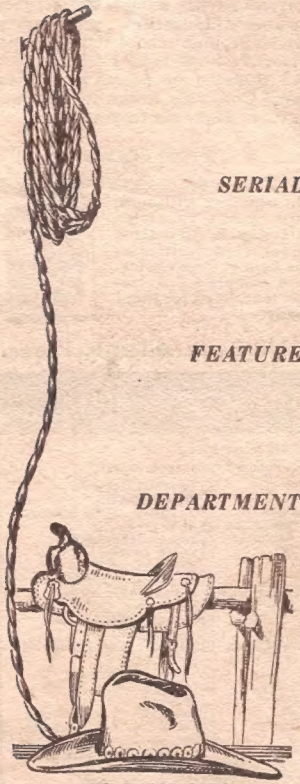

HELEN TONO
*Editor*

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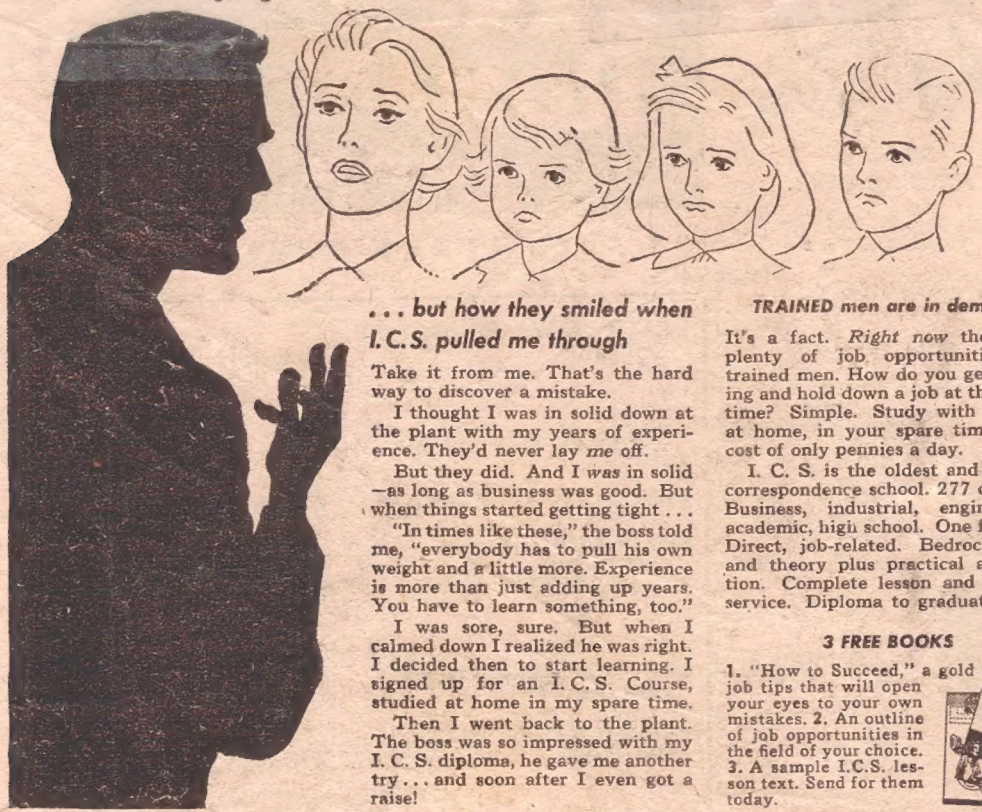
# I saw my job failure in my family's eyes



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### Ex-Serviceman

Dear Editor:

I wonder if you would enter my letter in the Air Mail column of RANCH ROMANCES. I am an ex-Air Force serviceman of the Korea police action, am 5'10" tall, weigh about 150 lbs. I have dark brown hair and hazel eyes, and am free, white and 21. My hobbies are model airplanes, photography, boxing, and music (blues). I would like very much to correspond with girls from 16 to 20, and will exchange photos with anyone who writes me.

JAMES H. WOOLDRIDGE

1606 So. Santa Fe
Chanute, Kansas

### Pen Pal from Ethiopia

Dear Editor:

I am very much interested in kids who live abroad, and I'd love to correspond with some of them. I am 5'6" tall, and have blue-green eyes and golden-brown hair. My favorite sports are swimming, tennis, and golf, and I adore dancing. I want to know all about the person who writes to me (if anyone will) and I'd love a picture, please, in the first letter.

MILA LURIE

Addis Ababa P.O. Box 1349
Ethiopia, Africa

### Boost His Morale

Dear Editor:

I am a steady reader of RANCH ROMANCES, but have never before tried to get in Our Air Mail. I believe that mail is one of the biggest morale boosters there is for a serviceman stationed overseas, and so I would be very happy to hear from anyone of the opposite sex. I am 5'8", weigh 170 lbs., and have brown eyes and hair. My interests are dancing, reading, and baseball.

JOSEPH SHEEHAN

Pfc. Joseph Sheehan, US 55290875
712 Engr. Co. (Depot)
APO 973, San Francisco, Calif.

### Handicapped

Dear Editor:

I am a 19-year-old girl with brown hair and green eyes. As the result of an accident when I was 16, I am paralyzed. I would like to write to some of you boys in military hospitals who are also permanently handicapped. I love hillbilly music, movies, and writing letters. I have a lot of spare time, so I'll answer every letter I get.

MARILYN HAUGHT

Box 116
Osteen, Florida

### Music Lover

Dear Editor:

How about putting my letter on the Air Mail page so I may get some pen pals? I'm a lonely guy, 21 years old, 6' tall, with dark hair and blue eyes. My interests are music and all kinds of sports. I'd like to hear from girls 16 to 25, so come on, pen pals, write me.

JAMES EARL TERRY

1061 Washington Street
Louisville 6, Kentucky

**EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.**

**Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.**

### Pen Pal Plea

Dear Editor:

This is my second try to get you to print my plea for pen pals. Please don't disappoint me this time. I'm a lonely farm girl, and would love to hear from some lonely serviceman. Surely there's someone who would like to correspond with me. I had reddish-blonde hair, gray eyes, am 5'5" tall and weigh 115 lbs. I'll be watching my mail box for lots of letters.

BETTY HIGHSMITH

Route No. 3
Mt. Olive, North Carolina

### Healthy Male

Dear Editor:

My friend Bob Graves received quite a return from his pen-pal appeal to you, so now I'm trying. My nickname is Pat, and I tip the scales at 180 lbs., distributed over a 6'1" frame. Brown hair, green eyes, and a normal ration of arms, legs, etc., complete the description. I am from Wilmington, Delaware, and I like all sports, especially roller-skating. Reading, college, and girls are my other healthy interests. I would prefer letters from girls ranging from 18 to 25, being within months of the latter mark myself.

PFC. L. T. PATTON

Regt. H & S Battery
12th Mar. 3D Mar. Div.
c/o FPO, San Francisco, Calif.

### Gardener

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with people aged 42 to 55 who are interested in flower culture and growing shrubs and trees. I'm a very lonely widow, aged 41, with brown eyes and hair. I spend my evenings reading, and haven't missed an issue of RANCH ROMANCES for years. I would really appreciate having my letter printed.

LAURA TAFF

Box 412
Brady, Texas

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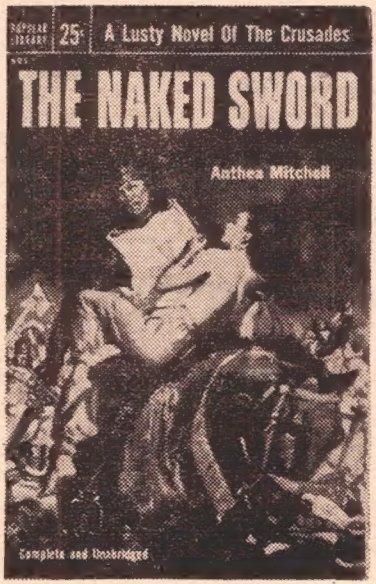


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# TRAIL DUST

**PARDNERS! Here's an open invitation to you to cut sign on colorful happenings of today's West. Send clippings to us, and include the name and date of the paper where you found it. We'll send you one dollar per usable item; in case of duplicates, first come, first served!**

A LITTLE girl in Portland, Ore., really believes in the cowboy movies she sees on television. She is reported as telling her younger brother, who was throwing things around, that if he broke the television set "all those little horses will fall out on the rug."

"I TOOK the specs so I could see my way out of the store," explained a Hamilton, Ont., man arrested for stealing a pair of reading glasses.

THE ORGANIST in a Newport, Ark., church was unnerved when, during a private practice session, a voice boomed out of the instrument. But investigation showed that the "ghost" voice was only an amateur radio broadcast picked up by the organ's amplifier.

MOST BEARS hibernate in dens in the ground, but one Sault Ste. Marie, Mich., bear must think he's a bird. He slept 53 feet up in a pine tree, till the felling of the tree roused him out.

THERE'S a woman in Evansville, Ind., who's complaining about getting too much money. $50 bills have been coming to her in the mail, along with notes explaining that the sender wants to repay money he once took from her purse. "No one owes me that much," she said, "and I wish they'd stop."

EVERYTHING'S greater in Texas, including the heat. A Sweetwater, Tex., housewife claims the eggs her hens lay, if not found immediately, soft-boil perfectly in the 104-degree temperature.

IT WAS HOT in Miami, Okla., too—so hot that the sheriff let prisoners leave the jail to come out to cool off on the courthouse lawn.

A 78-YEAR-OLD Colfax, Wash., man traveled the 60 miles to Spokane to the schoolhouse that was being torn down there. He came to claim the dime he had slipped into the concrete cornerstone of the school when it was built, 63 years ago.

THE TELEPHONE operator in Welland, Ont., investigated painful moans coming over a line, and found that a lonesome puppy had knocked a phone off the hook and was lying beside it and whimpering.

HIGHWAY patrol cars in Iowa carry signs across their backs showing traffic fatalities for the year—"184 killed in '54." An Osceola, Ia., patrolman reports that two small boys walked to the rear of his car and he heard one remark, "Let's see how many this one's killed."

A DALLAS, Tex., man claimed that his wife bit him—with his own false teeth. He won a divorce, and the judge also directed his wife to return the teeth.

# RANCH
## FLICKER TALK

by movie editor **BOB CUMMINGS**

*This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns*

# Chief Crazy Horse

***Universal pays tribute to a splendid Indian warrior and reveals a colorful chapter in the history of the winning of the West***

THE VANISHING American is still clearly visible—at least on the movie screens of America. Every notable Indian of the Old West will soon be as famous as Billy the Kid or Wild Bill Hickok, if Hollywood has its way.

Universal Studios, for instance, having shown two great Indian heroes, Sitting Bull and Cochise, to movie fans, are following up with a third, Chief Crazy Horse.

His name doesn't sound very noble to us, but to a Sioux it sounds like George Washington. Chief Crazy Horse was one of the greatest of Sioux leaders. He was responsible for the greatest Indian victory—when Custer's forces were annihilated at Little Big Horn, forcing the USA to set aside land in the Dakotas for the Sioux.

This splendid warrior is played by Victor Mature in a screen play which faithfully relates his successful yet tragic career. I'm giving away no secrets in warning you of the unhappy ending of *Chief Crazy Horse,* for the picture begins with a prophecy which tells the story of the rise of a great Sioux leader, of his victories on the battlefield, and of his death at the hand of one of his own tribe.

Suzan Ball plays Black Shawl, the Chief's wife, a woman of tremendous courage—though hardly more than Suzan herself has shown. She has managed to pick up her career again right where she had to drop it to have her right leg amputated when a cancerous condition threatened her. Since then she has regained her high spirits, replenished her energy, and gotten herself married to Richard Long.

This was her first part since her marriage, so Dick and she treated the location trip to the Black Hills of South Dakota like a honeymoon. Every moment when Suzan wasn't in front of the cameras, the newlyweds were taking in the sights—everything from the bones of prehistoric monsters to the faded splendors of the old boomtown of Deadwood.

Her determination not to let her handicap interfere with her life impressed everyone in the movie company—especially the real mem-

bers of the Sioux tribe, who played Sioux warriors. They proved that Indians have a sense of humor, too, when they called a meeting and voted Suzan "Miss Sweet Sioux of 1955."

Rounding out a trio of stars is John Lund, as an American major who forms a deep friendship with Chief Crazy Horse. John is one of those versatile actors who never gets typed—he'll play drawing-room comedy in one movie and horse opera in the next. And he enjoys every part he plays, just so long as it's different from the last one.

Most of the big cast of *Chief Crazy Horse* were actually Sioux Indians. They were eager to play in the picture once they were convinced that the true story of their hero would be told. The company even received the blessing of John Sitting Bull, the 91-year-old son of another great chief, and one of the two men still alive who survived Custer's Last Stand. John Sitting Bull's encouragement was silent, expressed in sign language, and relayed to the troupe through an interpreter, for he has been a deaf-mute since birth.

Perhaps the person who needed the most reassurance about a movie company filming the life of Chief Crazy Horse is the sculptor Korczak Ziolkowski, who is the Chief's greatest admirer—at least in terms of expressing his admiration.

Ziolkowski is engaged at the moment in carving a monument to Chief Crazy Horse, one that will be even bigger than the heads at Mount Rushmore of Washington and Lincoln and other US heroes. It will take twenty-two years to build and will cost several million dollars before the tremendous task is finally completed..

All of the cast and crew went to see this impressive undertaking, of course.

"I might have been skeptical that the monument would ever be finished," Victor Mature told me when he got back to Hollywood, "except that one of the Sioux said there was a legend in the tribe that Chief Crazy Horse would some day rise out of his grave and be as mighty as the Black Hills themselves!"

***"Chief" Victor Mature holds council with his Indian tribesmen***

# HUGH O'BRIAN
# Ex-Marine

THERE was one tough decision in the life of Hugh O'Brian, and Hugh admits that he may never be sure whether or not he took the right course. He's now a movie actor, but he might have been a Marine—two careers that seem widely different, but Hugh has a flair for both.

His interest in the Marines came from his father, a regular Marine officer. Hugh enlisted in that service as soon as he was through high school. At 18, he was the youngest drill instructor in the history of the Corps. He served so well as an enlisted man that when he was halfway through his four-year hitch he was offered an appointment to Annapolis.

"That really put it up to me," says Hugh. "There was a career for me, ready-made. I could have security in a life I loved, in a service I was proud of. I don't know why I turned down the chance. It wasn't that I wanted to become an actor—more that I wasn't sure what I wanted to be."

When he'd served two more years in the Marines, Hugh proceeded to find out what he wanted to be. His family, originally New Yorkers and later Ohioans, had moved to California, so Hugh joined them. He enrolled in Los Angeles City College, working in his spare time as a landscape gardener and later as a clothing salesman. A year after his Marine discharge, Hugh found the career he'd been looking for, when he joined an acting company called The Playmakers.

This job was satisfying artistically but not financially. The Playmakers performed in a theater with a capacity of 80—and even so the Standing Room Only sign was seldom displayed. But a few people in the movie business saw Hugh perform, and all of them urged him to continue as an actor.

It took three years of playing in little theaters and in summer stock before Hugh got his break, and there were plenty of times in those years, he says, when the three squares the Marines offer daily looked pretty good.

He started eating regularly four years ago when he signed a Universal contract, and in three years with that studio he has played eighteen different parts. He's portrayed a wide variety of roles and thinks there's not much danger of his being typed—except maybe as an Indian. He's played redmen in several movies, including his latest, the 20th Century-Fox film, *White Feather.*

For the past year Hugh has been free-lancing, which works out well because it gives him the chance to work in TV. He has been seen most often on the Loretta Young show.

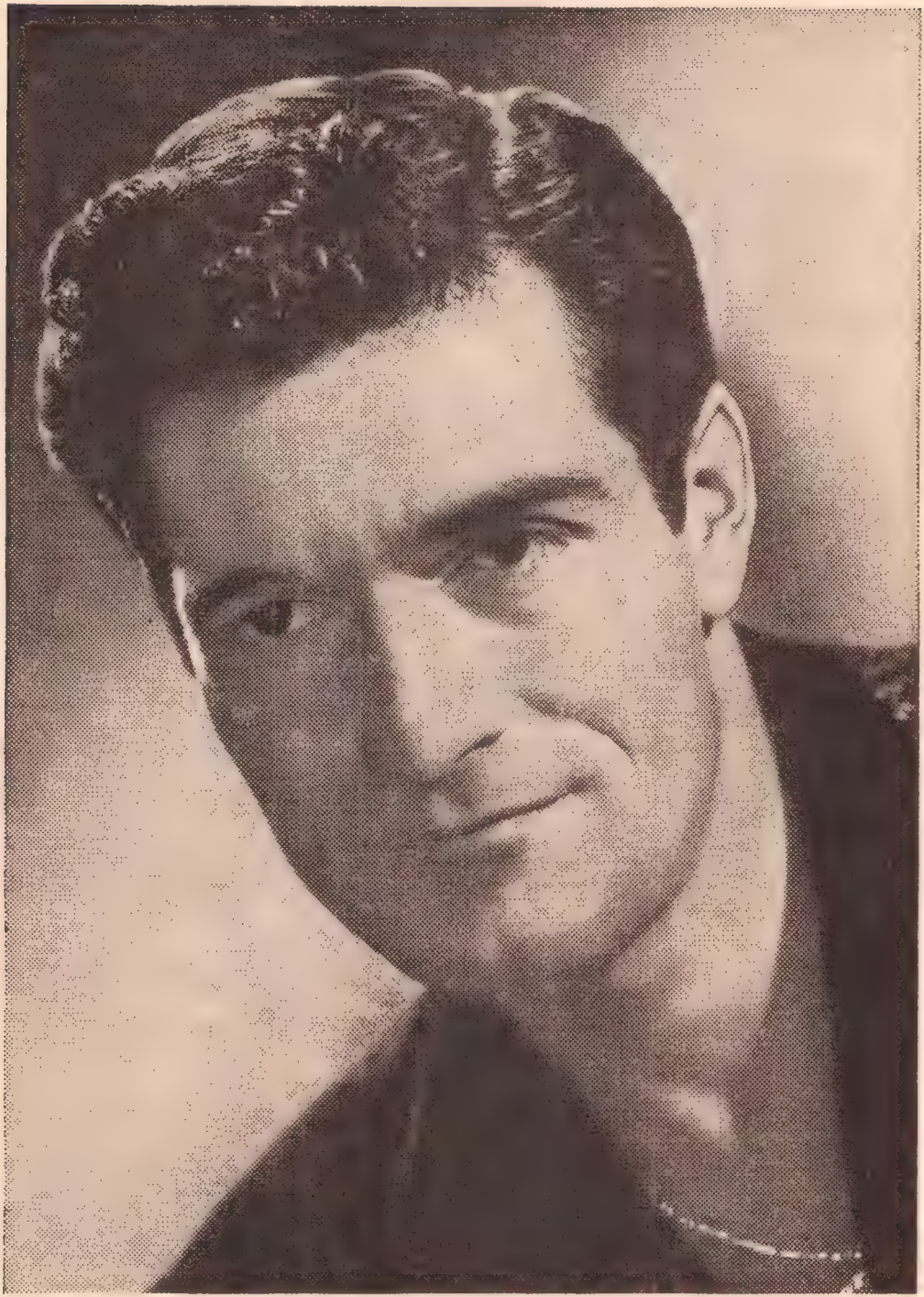
"I've been lucky so far without a movie contract," says Hugh, "but of course things could change overnight. There's no security in free-lancing. On the other hand, if I'd wanted security above everything else I guess I should have stayed in the Marines."

He keeps bachelor quarters in North Hollywood, but he hasn't much interest in home except as a place to sleep when he's working, and as a place to keep his dog, a toy collie called "Lady."

When he's not working he doesn't loaf. He's taking courses toward a degree from UCLA, and any time left over from his books goes for sports.

Hugh is an enthusiastic golfer and tennis player. He's recently taken up sailing and skin diving, but his favorite recreation is bicycling. Some day, he says, he's going to break the record for the bicycle run between Los Angeles and San Francisco. All he needs is a few weeks between pictures to train for this feat.

"Maybe," he says, wistfully, "if I were a Marine, I'd be in shape to do it already."



*20th Century-Fox*

***The Marines lost a promising recruit when Hugh took up acting***

# Death Waits At

*THE WILD MAGGARDS were all gamblers . . . and Clane Maggard was playing with the biggest stakes of all, his brother's life. . . .*

CLANE MAGGARD had known what the Palace would be like. He had seen many places of its sort and had lived in some of them, even as a boy. They were combination saloons, gambling halls, and honkytonks—places that blossomed for the quick profits of the boom camps, and then moved on. They were places that strived, with overdone elegance and luxury, to provide something that was missing from the rough daily lives of the men on the frontier.

Atmosphere. Rowdy Mike Maggard had called it, saying that it was the best come-on in the world. Put a man

# Destiny Gulch

**by KENNETH L. SINCLAIR**

in the right mood, with a cigar in his hand and a soft carpet under his feet, and he would spend every cent he owned. Let him see velvet and silver and he would try to act big—as if he belonged in such surroundings —in spite of what it cost him.

The cigars had always been free in Mike Maggard's places. The other things weren't.

But none of that had quite prepared Clane for what he saw when he walked into Mike's Palace here in Destiny Gulch.

This was a place of shining mirrors and red-shaded lamps, as all of them had been. But this one was big—there were more of the lamps than Clane had ever seen in one place before. The long mahogany bar must have set old Mike back several thousand in freighting costs alone, just to get it over the Sawtooth Mountains.

The smells of good whisky and Havana tobacco lingered thickly in the air. The piano that tinkled for the shuffling miners and the bare-shouldered girls they danced with had jewels set into its carved wood.

From adjoining, carpeted rooms beyond arched doorways came the click of chips and roulette balls, and the low-voiced singsong of the house men as they kept their games running smoothly.

Rowdy Mike had had what he'd always wanted, here. He had proved that he'd been right about the atmosphere and all the rest of it. Give people what they want, he'd said, and they'll crowd your place. He had been right, and what it had bought him was that fresh grave up on Boot Hill.

Clane sensed the hostility that the place turned against him. It came from a dozen directions—from scarred little Sim Rellew, over there behind his faro layout; from Lute Margolis, who was tending bar; and even from hunched little Blinky Wells, who peered over his shoulder at Clane without missing a beat on his piano.

They looked older than Clane remembered them. But then he thought, well, it's been five years. They were five years during which his world had been one of dust and heat and freight-wagon breakdowns. Hard work and trouble had molded him in their own fashion, and now he was a big, scarred, tough-looking man of thirty

He didn't belong here any more, and these people didn't want him back. It seemed likely that they were afraid of him. He had chosen his way of life and it wasn't theirs, and they didn't want him to ruffle up their discreet, profitable little world.

A man came toward him, one he didn't know—a fat man, with a gold watch chain stretched across his brocaded vest. His thick lips rolled back from his teeth as he smiled.

"You're Clane," he said. "The old man's son, eh? I saw you up on the hill." He waited.

Clane had seen this man at the brief graveside service. The old-timers had been there too—Rellew, Lute, Blinky and the rest. Even some of the girls had been there, dabbing at their eyes with perfumed handkerchiefs. None of them had lost any time getting back down here to work.

"I rode into the Gulch just before the service," Clane said. "Who are you?"

A soft, puffy hand sought his. "Alf Denbro. Your dad hired me as floor man a couple of months ago."

"You're running the place, then. It's customary, isn't it, for a business to shut down for the day when its owner is buried?"

DENBRO'S face took on a pained expression. "Look around you, Maggard. We've got a crowd, even now in the middle of the afternoon. This place takes in fifty dollars a minute, on the average. Why turn our backs on that kind of money?" His protruding eyes scanned Clane's face. "What do you figure on doing here?"

Clane shrugged, a feeling of distaste running throug him as he looked around. Rowdy Mike Maggard had had a certain touch, a way of handling people. He could slap a man on the back and invite him to come up to his place and be clipped, and that man would come. Mike had robbed them and made them like it. But there had never been anything crude, no rough stuff.

There was some rough stuff now. Clane's eye caught a sudden commotion in one of the gambling rooms. A roughly-dressed miner leaped up from a poker table, swearing in a drunken voice.

"I saw you look at the cards you dealt me.

you—" Swaying on his feet, he fumbled behind him, got hold of his chair, and lifted it over his head.

Clane crossed the big room swiftly. A lookout man who had been strolling around casually, with his sawed-off shotgun on his arm, got in Clane's way. Clane sent the lookout spinning, and got between the angry miner and the house man. Reaching across the table, he got hold of the dealer's wrist, so that the derringer the man had drawn fell from his fingers.

Clane twisted, turning the hand so that the inside of it was open to view. The ring which the man wore had a big rectangular stone that could serve as a mirror when the ring was turned inward, as it now was.

"Reading the cards as you dealt them, eh?" Clane asked.

The dealer shook his head emphatically. "No! No, I never do."

"Barney, you always were a good liar. But I watched you practice that mirror trick for hours at a time, remember?" Clane turned to Denbro. "Put another man on this game. Tell him to keep it straight, savvy?" He glanced at the miner. "And give this man as many chips as he bought when he started."

The miner mumbled his thanks and sat down again. Denbro, watching Clane, said softly, "That's how it's to be, eh? You see a good thing here and you're moving in on it."

Clane said, "Put it that way if you want. But from here on we'll get along on the house's percentage. See that word gets around."

He turned away, but Denbro's hand stopped him. His thick lips were parted in a fixed smile. "It isn't that simple," the gambler said. "Your old man owned the place, all right, but there's another son besides you." He smirked meaningly. "There'll have to be legal formalities before you can barge in here and take over."

"I'm here, and I *am* taking over."

Clane removed Denbro's hand from his arm and left the carpeted poker room. Threading his way among the dancers, he climbed the stairs. The first door on the right, in the rooms above, was marked OFICE.

He walked into it and sat down behind the big desk, shoving his hat back on his unruly red hair, rubbing a hand over his stubbly jaw. This was the first time he had been alone since coming to Destiny Gulch and he wanted to rest a minute, to think. He had been impulsive today, as he had been many times before. And yet it hadn't been entirely a matter of impulse that had brought him here, at that.

There was Bob, who would hear sooner or later of their father's death, and would probably come here. And there was John Cassiter, who had watched for Bob even at the graveside, up there on Boot Hill. Cassiter was gaunt and stooped, and always carried a rifle on his arm. He was the main reason for Clane's decision to move in on the Palace.

Clane swore softly. Cassiter was known and hated from Arizona to Montana. He was a bounty hunter who would wait around a long time, if he had to, in order to collect the rewards that were offered for Bob Maggard.

Clane wondered just how much those rewards amounted to by now, and he swore again. The total must be an impressive one to be worth Cassiter's time.

The wry thought came to him that all the Maggards had gambled in one way or another. There was Rowdy Mike, who had smiled and shrewdly figured his odds, and had died with an angry miner's bullet in his back. There was Clane, who took the risky freighting jobs that kept him broke as a result of smashed equipment. And there was Bob, who gambled in still another way, with his wits and the speed of his gun.

Bob would be fool enough to come here, all right. The Palace had the glitter of money, big money. It wouldn't last, once the boom in Destiny Gulch had dried up, but Bob wouldn't think that far ahead. He would walk into John Cassiters' trap.

It put a sour feeling into Clane. He wanted no part of the Palace nor the way of life it represented, but for the present he had to wait.

THERE was a light tap on the door. It opened and a girl came in, with a drink in her hand. She put the glass in front of Clane and perched on the corner of the desk, smiling down at him.

"I'm Lola," she said in a throaty voice.

"I hear you're gonna be Mister Big, and so—" she laughed a little—"it doesn't do any harm for a girl to be on good terms with the boss."

She was being honest about it, so Clane grinned up at her. "Don't place any bets on me, honey. I might not last very long."

He downed the drink and twirled the glass in his fingers, thinking that some of the others, the mourners up there on the hill, hadn't been so frank about their aims. While they preserved long-faced expressions they had looked furtively at one another, and Clane had guessed that each of them was wondering who would take over the Palace, each counting his own chances. All of them had been visibly shocked when Clane rode up to the graveside.

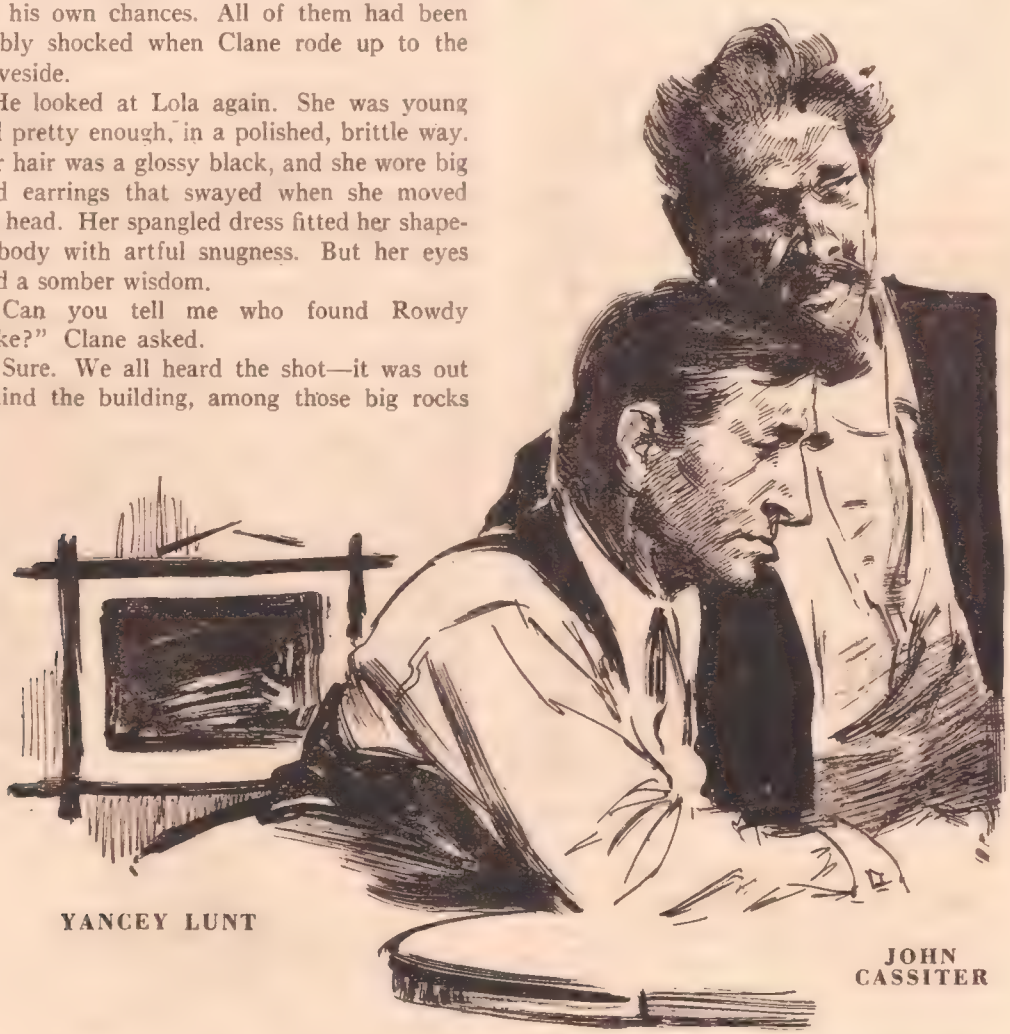
He looked at Lola again. She was young and pretty enough, in a polished, brittle way. Her hair was a glossy black, and she wore big gold earrings that swayed when she moved her head. Her spangled dress fitted her shapely body with artful snugness. But her eyes held a somber wisdom.

"Can you tell me who found Rowdy Mike?" Clane asked.

"Sure. We all heard the shot—it was out behind the building, among those big rocks on the slope. Mike used to go walking down there when he wanted to think. Lute Margolis got to him first, but there wasn't anything Lute could do. A bum loser shot Mike in the back because he didn't have the guts to do it any other way." She bit her lip. "Mister, you shouldn't torture yourself with all this. It can't do any good now."

He lifted one hand from the desk in a tired gesture. "I don't suppose you know whether Mike left a will."

"A will?" Her eyes opened wide. "No, I don't. But it's something to think about, isn't it? There's a lawyer in the Gulch that



YANCEY LUNT

JOHN CASSITER

Mike used to go down to see sometimes. I thought he was making a payoff so the law would leave us alone, but maybe— Well, his name's Yancey Lunt, and he's got an office upstairs over the assayer's place in the lower town. You ought to go see him."

"I'll do that, Lola," Clane said.

Destiny Gulch was a place of noisy activity. Men jostled Clane Maggard as he moved along along the plank sidewalks. Heavy freight rigs churned the dust of the street, mules straining in their harness, drivers cracking whips and swearing hoarsely at one another when the rigs scraped hubs in passing. The resinous smell of new lumber, drying in the sun, came from the buildings. All of the snatches of talk that Clane overheard were centered on one thing—the sudden wealth

that was being washed from the gravel of the creeks.

The assayer's place had an upstairs balcony and two outside stairsways that led up to it, one at either side of the building. Clane climbed one of them and, as his head came level with the landing, saw that several offices opened onto it. He glimpsed a fat man dodging out of one of the doors and going down the other stairway. Alf Denbro had gotten to the lawyer first.

Clane shrugged and let the fat man go. He stepped into the office that Denbro had left. It was not a big place, but it had a clean smell, and there were curtains on the windows. A desk was placed squarely in front of the door, as if to block the path of intruders.

There was a bunch of wild flowers on the desk, their stems neatly arranged in a jar. The girl who sat behind the flowers looked up from some papers she'd been working with and regarded Clane with an expression of polite inquiry.

She wasn't pretty, at least not in the calculated way that the girls of the Palace were pretty. Her blonde hair was cropped short and carelessly arranged and her small, rounded face had a scrubbed look. Her dress was made of some dark fabric, cut in such a way that it permitted only hints of her womanly roundness to show.

Clane looked past her. Beyond, in a sort of alcove, there was another desk and a big safe. A man and a woman were standing there in partial concealment, their arms tight about one another as they kissed.

CLANE cleared his throat and headed toward the man. The girl at the desk jumped up, saying, "Just a minute!" but he ignored her. He was thinking that this Yancey Lunt didn't know how to kiss a woman properly. A freighter would have done a better job.

The man and the woman stepped apart. She flicked a glance toward Clane

"I'm Clane Maggard," Clane said.

The lawyer was a tall man with a thin face that women would call handsome. He maintained a careful dignity, but his eyes were angry.

"Oh, yes," he said. "I'm Yancey Lunt, your father's attorney. This is my fiancee, Miss Torrance."

Clane touched his hat, glancing at her again. She was a tall girl, with reddish glints in her hair—about twenty-five, and a looker. She held herself proudly, so that the silk of her blouse strained over the full, shapely mounds of her breasts. The riding skirt that sheathed her lithe hips was of a quality that spelled money. Clane detected a warm, restless vitality in her, and for a moment he wondered what she saw in a coldly dignified man like Lunt.

The lawyer said, "We'll have to forgive him, Beth, for tramping in here like this. Freighter's manner, eh? I have some business to transact with him, though. You're going riding again?"

She looked at him archly. "It's the only fun there is for a woman, in a place like Destiny."

Lunt put a hand on her arm and steered her to the door. "You'll be more content when our house is finished."

"Of course." Her voice had a bitter tone. "Everything must be done in the proper order—first the house, and then me." Looking past Lunt's shoulder, she gave Clane a wispy smile. Then she nodded to the girl at the desk and was gone.

Lunt closed the door firmly. "You want to find out about the Palace, I take it. You can talk freely now." He gestured toward the girl. "Nora Wayne, here, is my secretary."

Clane said, "I want to find out if Rowdy Mike left a will."

"No, he didn't. I advised him to do so, but he refused to consider the possibility that something might happen to him."

The only sound in the room, then, was made by the girl at the desk. It was the quick intake of her breath, as she gave the lawyer a startled look.

The man was lying, but Clane knew it would do no good right now to ram ahead in a freighter's way and accuse him of it.

Lunt hadn't missed the sign that the girl had given. He frowned and picked up the papers from her desk, saying, "You'd better take these down to the printer's, Nora. Now."

Her face had a stricken look as she got up. She's afraid of losing her job because of that slip, Clane thought, and was sorry for her. She took the papers from Lunt's hand and fled from the office.

"Now," Lunt said, "we can talk. Sit down over there by my desk."

Clane settled himself into a chair, watching Lunt as the lawyer lighted a cheroot. He was covering a certain nervousness, Clane thought. Lunt dressed well, in the subdued manner of a prosperous townsman. Undoubtedly there was a lot of business for him here, in the boundary squabbles between owners of rich mining claims. But there was even more money in the Palace. It might be that Lunt and Alf Denbro had made a deal of some kind, which would account for Lunt's denying that there was a will.

"You got here very quickly," Lunt said, blowing out his match.

"I was on the other side of the mountains, on a freighting job. I rode day and night to get here."

Lunt nodded. "Rowdy Mike told me you were a freighter. Who sent you word of his death?"

"A mule-skinner who'd brought a load of mining machinery over here. He thought I should know about it, so he made a fast ride."

"I see. Well, lacking a will, there'll be some delay before you can take possession of your father's properties."

"I've already taken possession."

The lawyer smiled thinly. "Not exactly legal, is it?"

"Maybe not, but I'll make it stick."

LUNT leaned forward, nervously chewing his cheroot. "You're beating you brother to the prize, eh?"

"We Maggards aren't that sort of a tribe, mister."

"All right. You've seen John Cassiter waiting around, then. You figure that if your brother gets caught here he'll be in bad trouble, which he will. But as owner of the Palace you'd have money at your disposal, and you might be able to help him."

Clane's jaw hardened. This Lunt, he thought, was a shrewd guesser. "You're throwing a lot of questions," he said.

Lunt made an impatient gesture. "All right, don't answer them, then. But has it occurred to you to wonder how Cassiter got here quickly enough to watch for Bob at Rowdy Mike's funeral? He was already here, Maggard, because your brother has been here for weeks."

Lunt leaned back in his chair, glints of triumph coming in to his eyes. "That startles you, I see. Your brother's not in the town; he's out in the hills somewhere. A place like the Gulch attracts his kind, you know. Almost every day some miner makes a rich cleanup, and there's gold to be had. It's good pickings, for a thief."

Clane got to his feet. He had been jolted by the news, all right. "What does it get you to tell me this?" he asked.

Lunt spread his hands. "A small fee, perhaps, later on. I was Rowdy Mike's lawyer, and it carries over. Now I'd like to work for the family. In a place like the Palace there's always trouble. You need someone to keep the law off you, and I can handle that."

Clane looked down at him, thinking that Lunt didn't seem to be a man who would be content with small fees. He was building a house, and with freighting charges as they were he would need a lot of money for that. Beth Torrance was an expensive sort of woman, too. But whatever ambitions might lurk behind Lunt's broad forehead, they were well hidden by his mask of aloof dignity.

"I'll see you later," Clane said, and turned to leave.

"One thing more," Lunt called sharply. "Don't ask me to do anything for that brother of yours. He's gotten himself in a fix that no one can help him out of."

Clane made no answer to that. But as he went down the outside stairway he was aware that Lunt had parted the curtains of a window and was standing there, watching him. A thoughtful, wicked triumph was on Lunt's face; but then, as Clane looked up, the expression vanished and Lunt showed a genial smile.

Clane tramped hurriedly along the street. The immediate need was to find Bob and warn him that Cassiter was waiting for him here. Perhaps Bob knew that already, but he was five years younger than Clane and he was

a man in whom the urge to take chances pulsed like strong drink. He might come into the Gulch just for the hell of it, to brace the bounty hunter and to laugh when he won out over a man of Cassiter's reputation. *If* he won. . . .

Clane shook his head. He had always been a plodder, and he had never been able to understand Bob—nor their father either, for that matter. Both of them had wanted quick winnings. Clane had wanted something more solid, the feeling of earning his way. He had found it in the freighting business. And now, confronted by the duplicity of men like Denbro and Lunt, he felt out of his element.

If Bob were somewhere in the rough hill country, though, it seemed likely that someone in the Palace might know where he was. Information had a way of gravitating into a place like that. Men bragged to the girls, confided in them, and the girls chattered to one another. Perhaps Bob had come in to see Rowdy Mike. Lola might know about that. Clane would go there and ask her.

He had gone only a short distance, though, when he met Nora Wayne on the walk. She stopped, looked up at him shyly, and said, "Mr. Maggard, you don't really want the Palace, do you?"

It was an odd sort of question, and he asked, "Why wouldn't I?"

She bit her lips. "It doesn't seem right for you. I mean, you're not the kind of a man who. . . ." She faltered, looking away.

FOR AN instant he thought that she was trying to help her boss, but then he decided that she wasn't. He knew what she meant. He had the marks of his trade on him—his muscles were big and his nose had been smashed in a wagon turnover a couple of years ago.

He said, "I grew up in places like the Palace. I ran a faro table for four years."

"And you didn't like it."

"No, I didn't. It seemed too easy, a shallow way of making a living. So I got out. Lunt was lying about the will, wasn't he?"

The suddenness of the question caught her off-guard. She looked up at him quickly, and her gray eyes had a stricken look. "Don't ask me about that, please. Mr. Lunt has been kind to me. My father was killed in a tunnel cavein, and Lunt gave me work, respectable work." She glanced around at the town. "There's plenty of the other kind, but I didn't want it. I've got to be loyal to him now."

Clane nodded, thinking that she had told him all he needed to know. Lunt, or Denbro, or the two of them together, had plans for getting the Palace.

He thanked her and moved on, but something stopped him and he turned to look back at her small, erect figure as she made her way along the crowded walk. She was about the same age as Beth Torrance, he guessed, but there was a big difference between them.

Nora was a practical sort, busy with the everyday demands of making a living. She made no particular effort to be pretty, and that might be good insurance on this rough frontier, where a young woman needed to be wary. And yet Clane had sensed in her a subtle, inward beauty that made him want to overtake her and talk with her some more.

He called himself a fool, then. It must be that she wasn't interested in men, or she would have married by now. And certainly Clane Maggard, a tough-looking man from an unsavory family, was no one to interest a woman like her. He plodded on toward the Palace.

John Cassiter was lounging in front of the place, a bootheel hooked on the edge of the broad porch and his back resting against a post. His rifle was held loosely in the crook of his arm and his gaunt dark face was shadowed by the brim of his hat. An unlighted cigarette sloped from one corner of his mouth.

From inside the Palace came the tinkle of the piano, the high-pitched shriek of a girl, and the rough laughter of men. Cassiter seemed to be listening to those sounds, and yet his eyes watched Clane with a narrow interest.

""How about a light, mister?" he asked dryly.

Clane got out a match and thumbed it into flame, holding it to the tip of Cassiter's smoke.

"Thanks," the bounty hunter said. "You're Clane Maggard, aren't you?"

"Yeah, that's my name."

Cassiter let smoke dribble from his nostrils, still watching Clane. "I'm looking for a man who has a white-stockinged roan. Mighty fast horse, that one. If you see him, let me know."

The bounty hunter's voice held a subtly jeering tone. He had made no mention of Bob's name. He was testing Clane to see what he would do.

"I'll watch for that horse," Clane said, and turned away.

Cassiter would be watching him from now on, he knew. By so doing the bounty hunter would stand a good chance of getting to Bob Maggard. Cassiter must be banking on the knowledge that sooner or later the brothers would get together.

Clane was thinking that he would have to buy a gun, something that freighters rarely carried. He would have to stop this Cassiter somehow. Bob was in the wrong, but that didn't change anything. Bob was his brother, and Rowdy Mike wasn't here to protect the kid any more.

Clane went on into the Palace. The place was even busier than before. The long bar was lined three deep with men. One of the men was kept busy behind a little wicket, where he weighed the miners' gold and passed out stacks of little brass checks, each of which was good for a drink or a dance with one of the girls.

LUTE MARGOLIS wasn't behind the bar, though. Clane glanced over to the faro layout and saw that another house man had replaced Sim Rellew. Blinky Wells was on the job at his piano, but he wasn't looking around at all.

One corner of Clane's mind pondered those facts, brewing up a feeling of vague alarm that he didn't fully understand at the moment. He saw Lola dancing with a bearded miner and he inclined his head to her, beckoning her.

She freed herself from her half-drunk partner and came over to Clane at once. "I want to talk to you," he said. "We'll go up to the office."

"Why, sure."

Her eyes scanned his face briefly, and then she threaded her way through the dancing couples. On the stairway she stopped, sliding her hands down her spangled hips, until she was sure that the other girls had seen her. Then she went on.

Clane was amused by that. He still was smiling when he opened the door of the office and let her go in. Following her, he saw her stop suddenly. Then his smile died.

He had blundered into a trap.

They all were here—Lute Margolis, with his broad body leaning forward a little in an attitude of readiness; Sim Rellew, with his thin face made vindictive looking by the knife scar that reached from one corner of his mouth to his temple; wizened little Barney, and Alf Denbro.

They were scattered about the room with their backs to the walls, so that Clane was surrounded by them. Lola gasped and kicked at Lute, as the bartender shoved her out of the room. He closed the door behind her and turned quickly back to watch Clane again.

Denbro smiled his thick-lipped smile. "Sit down, Clane."

Clane tramped over to the big desk and sat down behind it. Swiftly he pulled open a drawer, thinking that Rowdy Mike must have kept a gun handy somewhere.

Denbro's chuckle made a soft sound in the carpeted room. "We thought of that, bucko. The gun isn't in there any more. This is one time you'll sit tight and listen."

Clane leaned back. "All right, so I listen. To what?"

Denbro put his stubby fingered hands on the desk. "Look, if you're thinking of squaring things up for Mike, you can forget it. It's already been done. A friend of the man that killed him did some talking to one of the girls, and we went after him. Lute put two bullets in him and threw him down his own mine shaft."

Clane said, "Lute, you make a good executioner. The Palace takes care of its own problems, eh?"

"Anyway, it's been taken care of," Denbro said. "So what more do you want?"

"For the present I want square games in here, like I told you."

Denbro's smile was becoming fixed in place. "You can't run a layout like this, bucko.

You aren't the type for it. And you turned your back on Mike years ago. Gambling wasn't good enough for you then, remember? We kept things going for him, times when he was out scouting for new locations. We've talked it over and decided that that gives us a kind of ownership. You have no right to horn in here."

"Did Yancey Lunt tell you to stall me off with that spiel?" Clane asked softly.

Denbro sighed. "He isn't going to be reasonable, boys. So we'll have to knock some sense into him, eh? Take him, Lute."

Clane reared up to his feet, kicking his chair away. Lute Margolis, his broad and sweaty face beaming now, lugged past the end of the desk and hit him with a big fist.

Rolling with the blow, Clane shifted and snapped back, driving hard knuckles into the bartender's belly. For a moment Clane was glad that they had chosen to do it this way. It put him on familiar ground. He had learned to take care of himself in a hundred freighters' brawls. He bored in, keeping his chin down and throwing his strength and weight against his opponent.

Lute wasn't easy. He was big and solid, and he was crafty. He dodged, feinted, and then he landed a blow that shook Clane up and would have felled a lesser man. He blinked in puzzlement when Clane kept coming at him. He tried again, and missed completely this time.

JOLTED by Clane's hammering blows, breath gushing between his clenched teeth, the bartender fell back step by step.

Clane aimed for that big jaw now. His fist seemed to miss, but the blow glanced along to Lute's ear. The big man was spun around by the force of it, his head canted far over and his huge arms outflung for balance.

Darting in to finish it, Clane was stopped by wiry arms seizing him from behind. They pinioned him, held him even though he tried to wrench free. Twisting his head around, he saw that both Sim Rellew and Barney had fastened themselves onto him.

Lute shook himself, his massive face leering at Clane. The big man had been hurt, and now he tramped forward to settle the score.

Once again Clane struggled to free himself and failed. A bitter, rising despair filled him. He should have counted on something like this, should have known that this would be no freighters' brawl with everybody standing back while two men fought it out. These were gamblers, and they rigged every game to make certain they would win.

Lute mauled him, hitting him systematically in the belly, in the face, in the belly again. Clane writhed, but there was no way for him to evade the blows nor to lessen their force. A red haze of pain filled his eyes. Through it he saw only the sweat-beaded, wickedly-grinning face of the man who was beating him.

A cold fear crawled in his mind. He couldn't last long, at this rate. He heard the shrill voice of Alf Denbro urge Lute to finish this quickly before those downstairs heard the commotion.

A consuming hate for Denbro swept through Clane now. The others didn't really count. Denbro had probably worked on their natural envy for Clane's seeming good fortune, and now he was using them as his tools, letting them do the rough work while he stood back in safety. Clane yearned to get to him and smash that thick-lipped mouth.

He sank down, abruptly, as if beaten beyond endurance. He heard Lute's grunt of triumph and satisfaction, as the bartender stepped back. Swiftly, then, Clane doubled over, throwing both Rellew and Barney over his back and against the startled Lute.

The three of them went down, sprawling. Clane staggered back, got hold of a chair, and lifted it. Alf Denbro's flabby face sagged in dismay and terror, and one of his plump little hands to a derringer out of the pocket of his vest. Clane leaped toward him, bringing the chair down in a swift arc.

Denbro flung up his arms to protect his head, and gave a sharp squall of pain when the chair hit them. The derringer fell to the floor. Denbro gave Clane a stricken, helpless look. As Clane lifted the chair again, Denbro whirled and fled from the room.

Clane started to follow him, but Lute got in the way. The big bartender was on his

*"They thought they'd killed you, Clane," Lola said*

feet again, and his face held an expression of bull-like tenacity as he lumbered forward. Clane struck him with the chair, smashing it over his head and shoulders. Lute swayed, eyes glazing, and fell to the floor.

Sim Rellew was crouched like a spring. One of his hands darted into his coat and brought out a knife. Clane fell back, stooped quickly, and picked up the derringer which Denbro had dropped. He leaned against the desk.

"Still using a sticker, Sim? Let go of it."

The faro man dropped the knife. Barney was behind him, and now the wizened dealer tried to make a run for the door. He stopped when Clane gestured with the gun.

Clane glanced down at the weapon, smiling wryly. It felt like a toy in his hand, but it commanded respect. It was a hideout gun, a gambler's tool, with two big, stubby barrels. Its heavy slugs would stop any man, and these two men knew it.

"Stand back against the wall, boys," Clane said. "We're going to talk a minute."

He waited, aware of Lute's heavy breathing and of the fixed intensity with which Sim and Barney watched the derringer. "I've found out that Bob is somewhere around the Gulch. Maybe he slipped in here from time to time to see Mike, or maybe Mike rode out to see him. You two might know where he's hiding out, eh?"

Barney said promptly, "I don't."

"How about you, Sim?"

Rellew's eyes took on a crafty look. "How would I know where he is?"

Clane grinned at him. "You always were curious about such things, Sim. You've used matters like that more than once to shake people down. But you were afraid of Mike. Right now you're afraid of me."

Rellew's scarred cheek twitched. "No I'm not. There isn't a thing you can do."

"I always could tell when you were bluffing, Sim," Clane jeered. "Your cheek twitches, and that's the signal. You've got ten seconds. If you tell me what you know before the time's up, it will keep me from putting lead into you."

Sim's eyes were wild. "I can't tell you something I don't know!"

"If you don't know, that's too bad—because I'm going to shoot you anyway."

Sim's eyes watched with a stricken fascination as Clane's finger tightened on the trigger. "All right!" he said wildly. "He's up in Granite Basin. That's about ten miles west of here. I followed the old man out there once."

CLANE bought a heavy sixgun, with belt and holster and ammunition at a store in Destiny. He strapped the heavy rig about him, settled it on his hips, and asked directions to Granite Basin.

The storekeeper gave them readily enough, but added, "There isn't any gold up there, stranger."

"I'm not after gold," Clane said. "I want a quiet place to rest up for awhile."

The storekeeper eyed Clane's bruised face, and said, "Looks like you need it. Must have been some fight you were in."

"It was," Clane said shortly, and left the store.

He had taken his horse to a livery corral after the funeral, and left it there to be grained and rubbed down. He got the horse now and rode slowly out of Destiny Gulch.

He was followed, as he had known he would be. Twice he glimpsed the distant figure of John Cassiter, stopped and gaunt in the saddle, behind him. And so he swung to the east to reach broken and rocky country where his horse would leave but little sign, and took a zigzag course that would confuse the tracker.

For nearly a mile, at one time, he rode up the bed of a stream. And then in the last light of evening he paused on a high ridge and swept his glance back and forth across the lower country.

He could barely see the tiny figure of the bounty hunter and his horse down there. Cassiter was circling; he had lost the trail completely. Satisfied with that, Clane swung west.

It was nearly midnight when he reached Granite Basin. The moon was up, and in its pale light he saw that the basin was a tiny place, walled in by high peaks to which the snow still clung. From a high divide he had seen a ramshackle cabin at one side of

the basin, and now he rode toward it along a well-defined trail.

A rifle crashed, its bullet wailing past him. Pulling rein, he lifted a hand. "Go easy there, Bob!" he shouted.

"Name yourself, mister," a voice called from some rocks about a hundred yards distant. "I saw you ride in, and one warning shot is all I give any man."

"Still the same old hothead, aren't you?" Clane said. "I always told you it didn't do any good to jump at things so fast."

There was a silence. The figure of a man came into view and ran forward with a limping gait. "Clane, it's you! I'd heard you were in Destiny, but I couldn't take any chances."

Clane looked down as they gripped hands, wondering at the changes that the years had brought. Bob had always been like their father, dark, slight in build, tense and quick. Now there was an edgy wariness in him, a bitterness that hadn't been there before.

"Come over to the shack, Clane. It's just beyond the rocks."

Clane gigged his horse. With his brother limping along beside him, he passed the rocks and stepped from his saddle in front of the shack. He saw that a fast-looking, white-stockinged roan was standing in the moonlight behind the shack. But there was another horse in front of the place, a palomino with a silver-mounted saddle.

Clane was about to ask if Bob had company, when Beth Torrance appeared in the doorway and leaned against the jamb. She looked at Clane with languidly insolent eyes and said, "Howdy, mister."

He shoved back his hat, not bothering to conceal his amazement. She looked curiously at Clane's battered face, but asked no questions about it. "You and your brother will want to talk, I suppose," she said. "I was just leaving, anyway."

Bob gave her a brief grin. "Fetch me some matches, will you? And some coffee too, honey."

Nodding, she stepped into her saddle. Clane scowled as he watched her ride away. It would be nearly morning before she could possibly reach the Gulch. He wondered what her people would think about that, and what Yancey Lunt would think if he knew.

He slanted a meaningful glance toward Bob. "You trust her? She could tell people where you are, and then there'd be hell to pay."

"She could, but she won't—not for awhile yet. I understand her kind. She's a thrill hunter, looking for something to amuse her. It pleases her to sneak out here to see a famous outlaw—me, Bob Maggard. That's a laugh, isn't it?"

"You're famous, all right." Clane bit off the words. "And she could sell you out any time."

BOB shook his head. "There are two things a woman'll sell out for—money, and another man. Her father owns half the claims down at Destiny, so she's got all the money she can spend. And it takes more than the kind of man she's got down there to turn her against me."

"Yancey Lunt, you mean? She's got his ring—didn't you see that?"

"Sure I saw it." Bob smiled and shrugged. "A man that doesn't watch his gold or his woman deserves to get robbed."

Clane's mouth tightened against a rising, frustrated anger. "When we were kids you used to see how close you could walk to the edge of cliffs. You're still at it."

"Well, I don't plod along like some men do, sweating out their lives in some damn canyon and never seeing the other side of the hill. And it's like Dad always said—the more risk, the more satisfaction you get out of winning."

"You've heard what happened to him, I reckon."

"Yeah, Beth told me. Too bad. But he lived his life the way he wanted it. Come on inside. Beth made us some coffee, and I reckon there's a little of it left."

The shack was bare of furnishings, except for a rusty little stove and an upended dynamite box on which there were two tin cups, some spoons, an opened can of milk, and a guttering candle. In one corner of the shack Bob's bedroll was spread on the earth floor, with his saddle for a pillow. Beside it were two brush-scratched saddlebags.

"You live real high, kid," Clane said acidly.

Bob whirled around to face him. "Dammit, I live like I want! I'm just camping here for awhile, that's all. Clane don't you start digging at me like you used to."

"I'll do more than that this time. You're in bad trouble. You've got John Cassiter after you."

"Yeah, Beth told me that too. When I get ready to pull out of here I'll go down and shoot that bounty-grabbing son. I owe him that. He got some friends of mine—took them in and collected his dirty money for them."

Clane looked at his brother in the candlelight, wondering a little at the mixed feelings that clashed within him. He had thought that he was tough, but he wasn't really tough at all. Bob was the tough one—hard, bitterly confident of his powers, dangerous to everybody and most of all to himself. But still, he was a Maggard, Clane's brother.

"You'll never get near Cassiter, kid. They say he can do uncanny things with that rifle of his. He's an old hand, and he knows his game. You're running too long a chance, sitting up here with that Torrance woman going back and forth. Cassiter's no fool. Sooner or later he'll wise up and follow her in here."

"Suits me. I'm fast with a rifle too, and I don't want him plodding along on my trail when I leave here."

"Look, kid." A pleading tone crept into Clane's voice now. "Pull out. Go someplace else. The Palace belongs to us now, and I'll run it and send you half the profits—more than that, even, if you need it. You can take it easy somewhere."

"Like a damn remittance man? I'd as soon be dead!"

"Well, maybe we can buy the law off. How much reward have they got put up for you?"

For just an instant Bob Maggard's defiant composure broke a little. "Plenty, I reckon. I used to tear the dodgers down and use 'em to start fires, but lately—" He drew a deep breath. "It isn't the kind of thing you buy off, any more. I was in on a railroad job down near Tucson, and it turned out there were guards hidden inside the express car."

He shook his head. "That was a bad one. They cut loose at us and I tallied one of them. The others got the fellers that were with me, and put lead into my leg. I jumped off the train, dragged myself out in the desert, and damn near died there. For days I listened to them looking for me, but they never did find me."

Clane's hands clenched slowly. He'd had a glimpse of the trapped despair that was walled up behind the hard front that the kid turned toward the world. Bob could only go ahead now, and he knew it. The charge against him was murder, and from that there was no turning back.

CLANE thought, we're a hell of an outfit, we Maggards. But he said, "Leave the country, then. Go to South America. I'll get money at the Palace and bring it to you tomorrow."

"Money? You think I'm broke? Go look in the saddlebags!"

Clane tramped across the room and lifted the bags. They didn't look full, but they were very heavy. He opened one of them and saw that it contained several dozen gold nuggets, some of them as large as walnuts, and some leather pokes that would be full of dust. He straightened.

"You've been robbing the miners."

"Like I said, a man who doesn't watch his gold or his woman deserves to get robbed."

Clane stalked toward him. "Kid, if it weren't for that murder charge I'd turn you in myself! You've got the gold. Why don't you leave here?"

"I want a little more of it." Bob smiled thinly. "Besides that, there's Beth—a real live woman, that one. Man doesn't find one like her very often." He looked closely at Clane's face. "I've been meaning to ask how you got bashed up. Been in a fight?"

"Yeah, a fight. The boys at the Palace didn't like my horning in."

"They wouldn't. And what makes you think Dad left the place to us? We both walked out on him. He came up here a couple of times and gave me hell because I didn't turn out to be like you—though I can't

see where you did him any good, either."

"There's a will, kid. Yancey Lunt is sitting on it, so my guess is that it contains something he doesn't want known. He and Alf Denbro are pretty thick, and they've got something in mind, I think. Bob, I'm asking for the last time. Will you pull out of here while you still can?"

"Nope. And I'm not going to be shoved by any preaching you can do."

"All right." Thoroughly angry, Clane dusted his hands. "The devil with you, then. I'll not protect you."

"Nobody asked you to! But wait—" Clane had moved toward the door, and now Bob blocked his way. An unsteady and dangerous light flickered in the kid's eyes. "I invited you in here for some coffee, remember? I've got a little grub to go with it. We're going to sit down and eat. It'll be like old times, Clane."

It was Bob's voice that held the pleading tone now. He wanted companionship, though he refused to let himself say it in so many words.

Clane shrugged and said, "All right, kid."

Clane spent that night, or what was left of it, in the hideout shack. They talked for hours, but he made no further effort to tell Bob what he should do. They had taken separate trails, and now they had reached a point where the paths were so far apart no man could reach across.

In the morning Clane saddled up and rode back toward Destiny Gulch. He still was a little angry with Bob, and a little sorry for him too.

His thinking swung back to their father. Rowdy Mike had been a shrewd man who liked to smile. He had tried ranching once, in the days that Clane could only dimly remember. The owners of the surrounding big ranches hadn't liked having an upstart on their graze, and a charge of rustling, backed up by vigilante law, had been their way of handling the annoyance.

There had been the terrible night when the Maggard place was burned out, its two cowhands killed, and Mike Maggard wounded. Clane's mother, with Bob in her arms, had somehow gotten Mike into a buckboard and had been permitted to leave. Even vigilantes maintained a hollow gallantry toward a woman, once they had things their way.

It had left more than a physical scar on Mike Maggard. He had gone back to gambling, which had been his work before he married. His wife had died within two years. Maybe the loss of the ranch, which had represented a solid start in life, had been too much for her.

Clane swore softly. Things might have gone differently for Mike after that if his sons had stayed with him. But Bob had always been unsteady, going off to distant places and getting in trouble there. Maybe Bob's life had been warped, too, by the things that had happened to the Maggards.

And Clane had hated the false world of the gambling places, where primped girls and pasty-faced dealers separated the suckers from the money they had earned by solid work.

But there was nothing to be gained by looking at the back-trails now. They had been traversed in the way men chose, and that couldn't be undone.

HE REINED up on a cliff top high above Destiny Gulch and looked down at the town, which teemed with mid-morning activity. Wagons rolled from one place of business to the other, unloading the merchandise they had brought over the Sawtooths. Men, their figures toylike in the distance, tramped along the streets and gathered in groups to talk.

Perched above the lower part of the town, looming over it, was the long, two-story building of the Palace.

Clane scowled down at it. It was the Palace that held the immediate danger to Bob Maggard now. Sim Rellew and Barney were there, and they both knew where Bob was hiding out. Either of them might sell his knowledge to Cassiter, to get even with Clane. Probably Rellew would have done it before, just for the money, but for the fact that Rowdy Mike's iron rule had held him in check.

That rule was ended now. And maybe there were others in the Palace who knew

about Bob, and who would talk if they weren't stopped.

Clane's big body straightened in the saddle. He could control the Palace, he thought. He would keep the lid on as Rowdy Mike had done, until Bob could conclude his shady business and leave. Clane would do that much for Bob, and no more.

It was noon when he rode in. Seeking a restaurant, he rode down into the lower town. He found one, a Chinese place in which the food wasn't bad.

He thought about Bob as he ate. Somehow he couldn't blame the kid too much. He had been wild, sure; but the man he killed had been a guard who had taken a job he must have known was a dangerous one. And yet that was shallow reasoning, Clane knew. It was a reaching out for some way to justify what Bob had done. The law wouldn't look at it that way.

Suddenly he couldn't eat any more. He paid the Chinaman and went out to his horse. He had just stepped into the saddle when he saw Nora Wayne on the other side of the street. The mountain wind was pressing her dress against her body, stirring her close-cropped hair. She saw him and beckoned to him at once. He rode over to her, touching his hat gravely.

"Mr. Maggard," she began, "I—" She looked away, biting her lip. But then some inner compulsion seemed to push her on, and she lifted her chin. "I want to talk to you."

"All right." He eased himself in the saddle, resting an arm on the horn.

She glanced up and down the street. "Not here. We could go down to the creek." She looked at him squarely. "This is something important. I'm not just trying to flirt with you, Mr. Maggard."

He stepped down from the horse and smiled at her briefly. She was being honest with him, and so he could be honest with her. "I wish you were," he told her.

She colored, and looked at him with an odd intentness. He walked along beside her as she started down the street. No, he thought, she wouldn't be interested in him as a man. He was battered looking and his face was covered with a reddish stubble of beard, since he hadn't shaved for several days. She saw too many of his kind in a place like Destiny.

They left the crowded town, with Clane leading his horse, and angled down a slope to the tree-lined, grassy bank of the creek. It was quiet here. Clane loosened the saddle cinch and removed the bridle so that his horse could graze. Nora seated herself on a rock, watching him.

"You're a methodical man," she said.

"I reckon. What was it you wanted to talk about?"

She smoothed her skirt, looking down at it. "I'm being disloyal to Mr. Lunt, I know, but I've got to tell you about the will. There is one, in spite of what he told you. I signed it as a witness, and I heard your father tell him what to write in it. That was just after your brother first came here. The will leaves the Palace to you and your brother, with the provision that you are to run it."

"Where's the will now?"

"Mr. Lunt keeps it in his safe. I don't know why he lied to you about it. Mr. Denbro came to the office yesterday, just before you did. He seemed excited, and they talked in low voices so that Beth and I couldn't overhear. I've been upset about all this, and I couldn't sleep last night. I always thought before that Mr. Lunt was fairly honest." Her slim back straightened. "There, I've done it. I've told you."

"What kind of law is there in the Gulch?"

"There isn't any. The county seat is on the other side of the mountains, and Mr. Lunt goes over there quite often. When there's been trouble here a deputy sheriff comes over and Mr. Lunt takes him around. I'd get that will for you, but he doesn't let anyone else know the combination of the safe."

"You'd do that for me?" Clane asked gently.

"Yes, if I could." She didn't look up, and so he stepped over to her and pulled her to her feet. She looked up at him with her lips parted but she made no sound.

ABRUPTLY he took her in his powerful arms and kissed her. It was a freighter's kiss, rough and demanding. He knew no way to convey to her the other part of it,

the feeling for her that had been locked up inside him since he first saw her.

She clung to him with a fervor that astonished him. But he broke it off, pushing her away. "I had no right to do that," he said thickly.

"You had every right. I wanted you to."

"Forget me," he told her in a strained voice. "We Maggards are a no-good bunch."

"You mustn't talk like that. Oh, Clane, I've been lonely for so long." She swayed toward him. "I'll get that will for you somehow."

"No need for that. Look, some people would say that I haven't got good sense, but I don't want the Palace and its easy money. I like to take the hard knocks, because I get something out of that way of life that I can't get otherwise. I've got to keep the lid on the Palace for awhile because of something else. But once that's done I'll be a dumb mule-skinner again, fighting the mountain grades with a freight rig."

"That's your life, and I'll make it mine too if you want me. Oh, I suppose I should be coy about this, but that's not the way I am. I just don't know how, I guess. And I'm used to hardships. I lived in tents beside mine tunnels all the time Dad was alive. I like it that way, too. It makes you appreciate the good things when they come.

He stared at her blankly. He hadn't counted on this at all. A great joy filled him; and yet his mind swung back to Alf Denbro and Rellew and the rest of them, and he knew that he might not live to take what Nora was frankly offering him.

"I want you for my wife, Nora, if you'll have me. But we can't plan now. There's something that I've got to do at the Palace."

She accepted that without question. But a shadow of fear came to her eyes and she said, "Clane, be careful. I hate that place. There have been killings up there—I heard that there was another one just last night. Please, darling, be careful."

Later, when Clane walked down the slope of the upper street toward the Palace, he did not see John Cassiter anywhere around. Probably the man was still out in the hills, trying to unravel Clane's trail. Cassiter

[*Turn page*]

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would have a time doing that. But a man who lived as the bounty hunter did, and had his sights set on big reward money, would be stubborn.

Clane breathed a little easier, though. If he were right about what Cassiter was doing, it took the pressure off him a little.

He had just stepped onto the broad porch of the Palace when a man he did not know came tramping across the street, calling gruffly, "Hey, Maggard!"

Clane stopped and turned. The man who faced him was past fifty, with a broad and muscular build and a ruddy face that was set in an angry scowl. An elk's tooth dangled from his heavy gold watch-chain, and a diamond glittered on one of his stubby fingers. The smell of good whisky clung to him. But not even the fine quality of his townsman's clothing could obscure the marks that had been left on him by years of hard work.

"You are Maggard, aren't you?" he demanded. "I'm Ben Torrance. You're running this trap now, I take it. My daughter said she saw you at the lawyer's."

"I'm running it, mister."

Torrance hooked his thumbs in the pockets of his vest. "I'm closing you up. One of my friends was killed in there last night. From what I found out, he got clipped at the faro table and made a holler about it. We found his body on the slope back there. He'd been knifed and then thrown out on the rocks."

THAT must be Sim Rellew's work, Clane thought. Freed from Rowdy Mike's control, the boys were cutting loose. But he said, "I was away last night, Torrance. But I'll look into it."

"That isn't good enough for me! There've been killings in there before, and we heard that kind of talk after every one of 'em. That place is a festering sore in the Gulch, and I'm through putting up with it."

"Do you run the Gulch, Torrance?" Clane asked softly. "King of the camp, are you?"

"I mighty near own it!"

"Well, what do you want me to do about it?"

A stubborn anger stirred within Clane now. He thought that there might be more than one reason for Torrance's ugly mood, since the miner must surely suspect some unpleasant things about his daughter.

"Close it up," Torrance snapped. "We never could get the law to do anything about the place, so I reckon you've bought off the law. I'm giving you till sundown tonight to close up."

Clane shook his head. His ingrained dislike for taking the orders of other men was one of the things that had made him an independent freighter. He didn't like being pushed, and Torrance's cocky stance, the belligerent tilt of his jaw, said that he meant to shove.

"You won't get anywhere that way, friend," Clane said. "You're just one man."

"I'll have three hundred more with me when I hit you. Sundown's the deadline, understand? I've passed the word already. I'm giving you one chance. Are you closing it, or do we burn it to the ground?"

"Neither."

Clane thought, wryly, that circumstances forced a man into strange moves sometimes. For himself he didn't much care what happened to the Palace. Maybe Torrance was right about it, and fire was the cure for it. But being pushed, dictated to, stiffened any man's resistance.

Then there was the fact that if those inside the Palace were thrown out of work, one of them would be sure to sell the secret of Bob's hiding place to Cassiter.

"All right, then!" Torrance jerked around and started away.

Clane stopped him. "Wait. I'm putting the lid on here, you can take my word for that. There'll be no more cheating, no more killings."

Torrance spat. "The word of a Maggard, eh? What's that worth? I know the kind Rowdy Mike spawned—a thieving killer, for one, a woman-stealing son that—" Shaking, beyond words now, the miner stamped away up the street.

Quietly, Clane watched him go. He was thinking that Torrance knew his daughter was seeing Bob Maggard. Understandably, that had infuriated him. And further, Torrance

was a fool. He was one who had never had money before and, now he had too much of it, was slightly drunk on the feeling of power it gave him. He had come here to show his importance by humbling Clane, so that he could boast about it later.

Well, he had failed in that. But he wouldn't be stopped now.

Shaking his head, knowing that he would fight for the Palace if he had to, Clane entered the Palace. He would hold things together for just a little while, long enough to convince Bob, somehow, that he must leave.

He halted, thinking suddenly that, even though a murder charge couldn't be bought off, Cassiter could. Clane's instinctive dislike for a bounty hunter had kept him from thinking of that before. It was beautifully simple, and it was the answer to everything here.

He would get the money together and then he would find the man. Then Torrance could burn the Palace if he wanted to. Bob could leave here when he chose, and would be on his own from that time on.

The place was not as busy as it had been yesterday. Only a few men were at the bar, and several of the girls were sitting at a table, talking among themselves in low tones. The games were drawing but little play.

IT WAS odd, Clane thought, that four lookout men, identifiable by the sawed-off shotguns they carried, were scattered about the place. There had been only one before. But maybe Denbro was worried, after last night's killing.

Blinky Wells looked around from his piano. He made a slight nudging motion with his chin, and his watery eyes seemed to be trying to warn Clane.

Clane frowned and pushed forward. He heard Lute Margolis's subdued chuckle as he passed the bar and he looked swiftly around, seeking a reason for the barkeep's amusement.

The reason was on the carpeted stairway. Yancey Lunt was standing at the landing, looking down with an air of ownership.

The lawyer didn't belong here, any more than Clane Maggard did. Lunt's sideburned face still held a look of ascetic, aloof dignity that never would fit in with what Rowdy Mike had called his "atmosphere." Clane went up the stairs and faced Lunt.

"Quite a ways from your office, aren't you?" he asked.

Lunt shrugged. "I'm not a patron, if that's what you're thinking. I have a bill of sale for this place, signed by your father before he died."

Clane dropped back a step. "You're dragging that one in kind of late in the game. Took you awhile to figure it out and get a signature forged, eh?"

"It'll stick, friend."

Clane thought that he understood how it had been, now. Lunt had told Alf Denbro what to do, and when things had gone wrong for them he had stepped into the open himself. His reputation as a lawyer, and the fees he made from that work, didn't count for much against the money he could make as owner of the Palace.

Clane had figured that Lunt was merely an adviser to Denbro, a man who would remain carefully in the background. In that he had misjudged the man. Lunt knew the wealth that rolled into the Palace, and for it he had stepped across the line. There was no stepping back, and he knew it; word of this would be all over the camp in a day. Lunt was making his stand, against Clane as well as the town, even though it must surely cost him Beth Torrance.

Lunt's head tilted quickly, in a sort of signal. Clane looked around and saw that the four lookouts had converged on the bottom of the stairway and Lute Margolis was coming heavily up it with a shot-loaded club in his hand. Somewhere in the place a girl screamed. Clane remembered the gun that he had bought and he drew it, but Lunt, behind him now as Clane turned to face Margolis, kicked the weapon from Clane's hand. Margolis's face contorted with hate as he bounded up and struck wickedly with the club.

The shock ran down through Clane's body, buckling his knees. Then he was falling, tumbling down the stairway. Something struck him again and for an instant unbearable pain flooded through him. Then there was only blackness and quiet.

HE STIRRED and opened his eyes, but there was no light. His head throbbed with a dull agony. He lay among rocks, and he shifted his body painfully but could not get up.

Something wet and cool was on his forehead. A hand patted it and a voice said cautiously, "Be still."

He could see the stars now and knew that it was night. Gradually his eyes made out the dim figure of the girl who crouched beside him, putting another damp cloth on his head. It was Lola.

From somewhere above came the steady tinkle of the piano in the Palace, but it seemed strangely hushed. There was no shuffle of dancing feet, no rough laughter.

"They thought they'd killed you," Lola said. "Sim wanted to make sure with his knife but that cold fish, Lunt, didn't want the carpet messed. So they threw you off the back porch into these rocks."

Torrance's deadline for the Palace had been sundown, and still the piano played. Maybe Lunt had been able to fend the miners off, Clane thought.

"I couldn't come down for a long time," Lola told him. "But there's a bunch of men gathered in the street now. They were yelling that they were going to tear the Palace down. Lunt started to talk to them, and I slipped out."

Clane staggered to his feet. His body was bruised and his clothing had been torn by his fall to the rocks, but no bones seemed to be broken. The gamblers had thought they had cracked his skull, probably, but a freighter's head was harder than they knew.

"Where's Denbro?" he asked. "I didn't see him in there."

"They killed him, I think. They all had a big row up in the office, and then Lunt came down with Sim and Lute and talked to them for a long time. Then they went back up, and we heard a man scream." She shuddered. "I don't know what they did with Alf. That Lunt is a devil, mister!"

Clane thought that she was probably right about that. The lawyer had operated as ruthlessly as any outlaw in this. Maybe he had hoped that Cassiter would follow Clane to Bob's hideout and kill both of the brothers there—that might be the reason why he had smiled when Clane left his office. It hadn't turned that way, and yet Lunt had gone right ahead. It seemed likely that Denbro had kicked over the traces, wanting a better deal than Lunt had offered him, and so Denbro had been killed.

"Thanks, Lola," Clane said, "for helping me." He didn't ask why she had done it; he had seen girls of her sort help injured men before and had always thought that they must yearn to mother something.

"Forget it, mister. Rowdy Mike was always kind to me, and— Hey, where are you going?"

"I don't know," Clane said, and that was the truth.

He left her and worked his way up the rocky slope, passing a high, stilt-supported corner of the Palace building. He had lost his gun; his holster was empty now. He didn't go directly to the street since the crowd was there, but circled behind several other buildings before climbing up through the narrow, littered space between two of them.

Breathing hard, he stopped at the edge of the sidewalk. The men in front of the Palace had torches. Clane heard Ben Torrance's raw voice yell, "There's been too much of this talk! Lunt, I've given you a lot of business, and now you've crossed me. I'm not taking that, you shifty son! You've gone over to that crowd of card sharps and killers back of you there, and from now on we'll treat you like we do them. I'll see that you never get near my daughter again, savvy?"

Lunt was standing on the porch of the Palace with a dozen or so armed men behind him. He said something that Clane's ears didn't catch, something that visibly infuriated Ben Torrance. The miner's face contorted as he pulled a gun partly clear of the pocket of his coat, but he was restrained by those around him.

"Don't want her now, eh?" Like a tortured bull Torrance struggled against those who held him, but presently he subsided. "All right, boys," he panted. "I won't start anything with all those guns in front of us. But I'll settle with you, Lunt, for dragging my

daughter's name in the mud! Boys, his saying that he's taken over the Palace is just a trick to stave us off. Fetch that wagon!"

"I warn you," Lunt shouted as the crowd fell back, "that I'll protect my property. These men have orders to shoot."

"Shoot and be damned!" Torrance bawled.

The miners were taking cover across the street from the Palace. There weren't as many of them as Torrance had boasted he would have. Clane judged that there were about fifty men, many of them openly chary about getting into a gun battle. But several of them started up the street, running in his direction.

Clane turned and kept well ahead of them, staying close to the walls of the buildings.

LUNT might be able to fend off whatever attack the miners might make upon the Palace, Clane thought. Lunt had able men at his disposal now and, once a few miners got killed, the spirit of the mob would collapse.

Sooner or later, running the Palace, Lunt would learn of Bob Maggard's whereabouts. He had told Ben Torrance that he didn't want Beth any more, but he had a certain vicious pride, and he would enjoy seeing Cassiter corner Bob anyway.

Clane wondered if it would be worthwhile to try to get that will, and decided against it. The thing was just a piece of paper, in this boom camp where there was no law. Clane was only one man, and he had been fighting a foolish, losing battle here from the start.

He stepped behind some boxes of merchandise that had been unloaded in front of a store and hadn't been removed. He stood there, the effects of his beating demanding that he rest a little, as the half-dozen miners who had left the main group pounded past and turned into the livery corral across the street. He watched them curiously, wondering what they intended to do.

A low voice, close behind him, said, "That was quite a wild-goose chase you took me on, Maggard."

Clane whipped around. The torches had been extinguished now, but the moon was coming up and there was enough light for him to make out the gaunt, leathery face of John Cassiter. The bounty hunter had his rifle in his hands and he gestured warningly with it.

Cassiter said, "You went to considerable trouble to shake me off. Proves that your brother's around here somewhere, doesn't it?"

Clane said, "The hell with you."

"Don't like me any, do you?" Cassiter's humorless grin folded deep furrows in his cheeks. "Well, that doesn't change a thing. You wouldn't lead me to that brother of yours, but my hunch says that sooner or later he'll come to you. So I'll stick close to you for awhile. From your looks I'd say you've had a rough time and might need a little help, at that."

Clane's mouth twisted in bitter distaste. "Keep away from me, you damn bounty buzzard," he said in a flat voice.

Cassiter's glance flicked down to Clane's empty holster, then returned to Clane's face. With a bony hand he slapped the stock of his rifle. "Like I say, I'll stick around."

There was more light on Cassiter's face now. He moved back a little, into the deeper shadows cast by the piled merchandise. Clane turned, his eyes searching for the source of all that light, and saw that the miners had set fire to a wagonload of hay in the livery corral. Now they were backing the wagon into the street, pushing and steering it by means of the tongue. Once they had it headed down the hill, the light rig picked up speed.

A shout of alarm came from the Palace. A rifle made a crashing report, its echoes running swiftly through the town and trailing away along distant cliffs. The shot was quickly followed by others, and stabs of gun flame reached out from both sides of the street.

A man screamed; but a roar of triumph came from the miners as the flaming wagon careened onto the Palace's porch and snapped off the support posts, so that the porch roof collapsed downward. The wagon slammed against the wall and halted with a shower of sparks and a brittle crashing of windowglass.

There was confusion in the Palace now. Lunt and his men had retreated inside the place when they saw the wagon coming. They hadn't been able to do anything to stop it, and now they couldn't stop the flames which ate swiftly upward in the tinder-dry wood.

The screams of the girls laced through the rising, crackling roar of the fire.

No one would be trapped in there, Clane thought. They all could jump from the back porch. But the Palace was finished. Ben Torrance would have something new to boast about now.

A new sound struck at Clane's ears. It was a dull, partly muffled explosion that came not from the Palace but from somewhere in the lower town. Puzzled by that, Clane darted to a point where the sidewalk bridged a gully, and looked downward.

The moon was fully up now. In its pale light he could see the curtains of Yancey Lunt's upstairs office, billowing out through shattered windows. Nora, he thought instantly. That crazy girl has tried to blow the safe!

But then he saw something else. A horse stood slack-hipped at a hitchrack across the lower street from Lunt's office. It was a roan pony with white-stockinged feet—Bob Maggard's horse.

Cassiter was at Clane's side now. The bounty hunter grunted with satisfaction as he saw the horse. Then he leaped into the gully and started running down the steep slope toward the lower town.

"Keep out of this, mister," he called over his shoulder.

Clane followed, his empty holster flapping at his thigh. There was no time for him to break into a store and get a gun. But a thin hope kept him going. Things had passed entirely beyond his control here in Destiny, and yet he might be able to warn Bob in time.

CASSITER could run. He was a hundred yards ahead of Clane when he reached the assayer's building and started up the outside stairway. The bounty hunter moved slowly now, prowling upward with his gaunt body sliding along the wall of the building. Reaching the landing, he crossed swiftly toward one of the gaping windows.

"Bob!" Clane yelled. "Cassiter's up there Watch out!"

Swift gunfire erupted from inside the office, its flame stabbing out through the window and yanking the thin curtains crazily. Cassiter jerked back and then knelt, passing under the window and reaching the door.

Clane reached the bottom of the stairway. His boot struck a piece of splintered windowsill that had fallen from above, and he picked it up. Gripping the futile weapon, he moved silently upward.

When he reached the landing he saw Cassiter boot the office door open and then draw back, flattening himself against the wall.

The man inside fired through the doorway. Trapped and scared, he was wasting shells.

Cassiter was banking on that. "I'm coming after you, Maggard," he called and then threw a swift, teasing shot through the doorway, instantly jacking a fresh cartridge into the chamber of his rifle. He's counting Bob's shots, Clane thought. He wants Bob's gun to be empty.

The bounty hunter's attention was centered upon the doorway, so that his back was toward Clane. Clane moved ahead, and winced when his boots grated upon splintered glass.

But Cassiter didn't notice that. From inside the office there came the sharp click of a gun hammer falling upon a spent cartridge. Cassiter darted forward instantly into the office.

Clane pounced after him, bringing the heavy piece of wood down upon Cassiter's head. The bounty hunter stumbled, took two steps on buckling legs, and twisted half around, trying to lift his rifle. Clane struck again and Cassiter groaned and hit the floor.

Bob was crouched behind Nora Wayne's desk, frantically reloading his gun in the moonlight that reached in through the windows. The door of the safe stood open, hanging askew from its top hinge. The explosion that had blown it open had peeled back the carpet and upset Lunt's desk. Papers were scattered about the room.

"Thanks, Clane," Bob said shakily, looking at Cassiter. "That devil nearly had me this time." He took a paper from the pocket of his shirt. "I got the will for you. I saw Beth and she told me that Lunt kept it in his safe, so I helped myself to a miner's dynamite. Used too much of it, I guess—damn near blew this whole place apart."

Clane took the paper, knowing that it was worthless now. The flames of the blazing Palace threw their red glare against the win-

dows, though Bob was too keyed up to notice that. By morning the Palace would be a heap of smoldering, charred timbers.

"Bob, you've got to get out of here. Cassiter will be coming around in a minute or two. And Lunt knows about you and Beth, I think. So does her father. They'll kill you if they see you. You've played your string too far, kid."

Bob finished reloading his gun, and holstered it. He wiped an arm down across his face, taking the sweat from it. "Yeah, I reckon."

A boot crunched on the glass on the balcony outside. Yancey Lunt appeared in the doorway, tall and unnaturally calm, his black string tie askew and one of his sideburns singed so that it made a dark smear on his jaw. There was a derringer in his hand. He fired instantly, at Bob Maggard.

The bullet's impact flung Bob back against the wall. His gun had been half drawn, and now it thudded to the floor. He swayed, staring down at the spreading crimson on his shirt front.

Clane darted around the desk. Lunt fired at him, but Clane was a moving target and the shot missed. Clane got the heavy, solid feel of Bob's gun in his hand and reared up. Lunt was fumbling to reload the derringer and now he looked up, an expression of terror coming to his face.

Clane had no compunction about this. He fired two shots. Yancey Lunt swayed in the doorway and then toppled, falling across Cassiter's legs.

BOB had slid down to a sitting position. A crimson froth trailed from one corner of his mouth, as he looked at the men on the floor with a strange wry humor.

"Funny," he said, "the turn a man's luck can take. Cassiter couldn't get me, but that slab-faced greenhorn did. Well, it's better'n hanging." A spasm shook his body. "Never could have worked things out anyway. That Beth, she was the woman for me. She would have gone away with me. But I wouldn't do that to her, wouldn't put her on the kind of trail I had to ride."

He looked at Cassiter, who was stirring a little now. "That snake wasted a lot of his time on me. The railroad wanted to see me hang . . . dead I'm not worth a nickel to 'im . . . funny. . . ." His voice trailed away, and then a final spasm came to him.

When Clane Maggard went down the outside stairway he moved slowly, painfully. The effects of the beating he'd had in the Palace had been pushed aside temporarily by the urgency of what had happened since, but now they had returned.

He looked at the legal paper in his hand, and crushed it in his fingers. Bob Maggard had tried to help, but he had died as he had lived, risking himself for something useless.

In the red light of the flames Nora Wayne came running along the street. She saw Clane, swerved toward him, threw herself into his arms.

She clung to him. "Oh, my dear, I was afraid. If I'd lost you—" She drew back a little, looking up at him. "They've beaten you."

"No matter." He smiled tiredly. "Lunt's dead. I've done you out of a job, I reckon. I had to kill him, Nora."

She looked at him steadily. "I'm sure you did only what had to be done. They're saying that Yancey took over the Palace, and defied Ben Torrance, and talked about Beth. Ben would have killed him anyway, I think." She glanced up the hill toward the blazing building. "Clane, I'll leave this place with you whenever you say. Right now, if you must."

A great peace washed through Clane Maggard then. There was sadness, yes; that couldn't be escaped. He would bury Bob beside their father, in Boot Hill, where the paths of their lives had led them. Then he would leave this Sawtooth country. Cassiter couldn't touch him and wouldn't want to, without the prospect of a reward.

There was freighting work to be had down in Colorado. Clane would take Nora down there, and he would build a house for her. When he got back from his freight runs she would be waiting for him.

"Tomorrow," he said softly. "We'll leave tomorrow."

# Betrayal at

*MARSHAL DREW YORK had a fine scheme to catch the bank robbers . . . and it wasn't his fault that even Mother Nature was against him*

*Two sudden shots rose above the muted sound of the wind*

# Buttonhook

*By JAMES CLYDE HARPER*

I'M pretty good at some things—handling a gun, using a lariat and branding iron, riding a tough bucking horse. But at solving my first case as marshal of Buttonhook, I'm a failure. I know it, Janey King and her father suspect it, and my prisoner openly gloats about it.

Through the bars that separate the small front office and the jail, I watched him roll and light a cigarette and insolently stretch out on his bunk. I've questioned him since ten o'clock this morning—almost twelve hours by the clock. And I learned just as much with the first question as with the dozens of others since.

I'm pretty discouraged and irritated. But I said, once more, "For the hundredth time, how could you, right-handed, shoot yourself in your right shoulder without leaving powder burns?"

He said, "My name's Sig Marly, I'm from Texas, and I accidentally shot myself."

The same answer—the only answer—to every question. Legally, it was the only answer he was required to make. But after twelve hours of it, I'd hear it in my sleep.

"You're a liar!" I jerked erect from the sawed-off stool. The stir of air caused the wall lamp to flicker, and my shadow danced erratically across the bars of his cell. "You're both a thief and a liar, and you know it. You caught that slug when King chased out into the street and fired at you and your partner as you were racing away from robbing his bank."

I waited for his answer—his usual answer. But to my surprise he pinched out his cigarette and said, biting off each word, "Call me a liar sometime when we're both wearing guns."

Then he rolled over and turned his back toward me. I stared down at him, knowing defeat. I'd never get Sig Marly to talk. He was tough, tough and hard. Yesterday, after catching him far out on the flats, too weakened by loss of blood to endure more of the grueling pace of escape, I took his gun, herded him to jail. He hadn't made a sound when I cut out the bullet with a whetted knife, using whisky for an antiseptic.

Today, rested, his strength returning, he'd used the right arm to eat, even before the wound was healed enough to remove the bandage. Tonight he'd used the hand and arm to roll and light a cigarette. Tomorrow he'd be ready to draw again, if he had a gun. And the man who drew against him had better be good.

I frowned, wondering if that man would be me, and if I would be good enough. I walked over and turned the wall lamp lower so the oil would last all night.

ALL RIGHT," I grunted, "be tough. Don't talk. But let this stew around in your thick head. Two masked men robbed Frank King's bank yesterday, wearing dark clothes, riding dark horses. Frank wounded one of them when they raced away. That was you, even though you'd changed clothes and washed the lampblack from your horse before I caught you. That meant you both stopped somewhere to change clothes and wash your horses. You didn't have enough time between the robbery and when I caught you to do all that and divide the money, too. It takes time to count out and evenly divide thirty thousand in gold and silver, and that means you hid the money. But while you're penned up here your partner is outside free. He knows where the money is hidden. What do you think he's thinking? What do you think he's doing?" I laughed and started for the partition door. "Pleasant dreams, Sig Marly, if you sleep at all."

I thought for a moment that I had hit the mark. His rhythmic breathing stopped an instant. Then he grunted. "I want scrambled eggs for breakfast, a thick slice of ham, and lots of coffee. Maybe you'd better bring a pot."

I swore under my breath, stalked out, and pulled the partition door shut. It was nearing midnight, but I wasn't sleepy. I sat at my desk trying to find an answer. I found myself regretting the day I took the job as marshal of Buttonhook. But I knew I would do it again, especially if Janey King asked me, a plea in her big brown eyes and a smile on her soft full lips.

Four months ago I'd come to Buttonhook country, riding point on a herd to be shipped out from the railroad loading pen. It was my first trip into the southwest country, and I didn't care for the sand and the baking heat, nor the handful of houses and stores which comprised the tiny settlement.

But it seemed that ranchers scores of miles away were beginning to take notice of this settlement. The loading pen offered quick transportation to cattle markets, and Frank King's little bank offered gold and silver for cashing a check or a cattle buyer's draft.

Owner of the far-flung Buttonhook Ranch, the portly cattleman-banker was retiring from active management. But in leaving one vast enterprise, he was taking over another—that of building the loading-pen settlement into a town.

But I didn't care for anything this town and this country had to offer. As soon as I got my pay I was hitting a fast trail back north, away from this dust and heat.

And then I met Janey King.

It was at the little hole-in-the-wall restaurant across the wide dusty street from the little-used city marshal's office and jail. I had pay rattling in my pocket—some of Frank King's gold and silver—and was looking for a place to spend some of it. But there was no saloon, no poker tables, not even a blind tiger in the back part of the livery barn.

With nothing else available, the only thing to do was to eat a steak and get the heck away from this place. So I went to the restaurant; and there was Janey, sipping a cup of coffee. I craned my neck when she left, and watched her go into the bank.

I put loading-pen gossip together and came up with the answer. She was Frank King's daughter, and she helped him run the bank. They traveled back and forth each day between the bank and the sprawling Buttonhook ranchhouse, seven miles south. She was, I decided, about everything a woman could be.

FINISHED eating, I took my horse back to the livery barn, told the man to unsaddle and feed him, and put him in a stall.

I was still loitering when Janey and her father came for their buckboard to go home. Also present were two fuzz-faced trail hands who'd somehow found a bottle of whisky and let it loosen their tongues too much. They tried getting cute with Janey.

Janey didn't like it, her dad didn't like it, and I didn't like it. I said, "Shut up and get moving."

I saw Janey's eyes widen as she looked at me. Her dad started to speak, but didn't. The boys blinked, then decided to teach me. They fell apart a pace, hands dropping toward guns. Even sober they couldn't have outdrawn me. Drunk, they didn't have a chance.

But I didn't reach for my gun. I jumped for them, grabbed each about the neck, bumped their heads together. Then I hustled them over to the horse trough and dumped them in. Their guns dropped and I picked them up.

The boys weren't tough when they spluttered from the water trough. "You can have these," I said of their guns, "when you grow up." They slunk away, dripping.

Janey smiled her thanks. Her dad, eyeing me from head to toe, said, "Can you handle that gun you're wearing?"

"If I have to."

"You're hired," he said. "City marshal, pay one hundred and found for yourself and horse per month."

"I don't know . . ." I glanced across the desert, where a half-dozen dust devils spiraled, and heat waves gave the earth a fluted look.

"Please," said Janey, smiling at me. "Daddy keeps so much money lying around in the bank I'm always afraid something will happen."

"Gold will attract men, men will bring business, and that means a growing town," declared Frank King.

"Gold will also attract thieves," I said.

"That's why I'm hiring you," he responded shortly.

And Janey added, her eyes and her smile seeping into me, "Please."

I took the job.

I opened an account at the bank. Janey completed the transaction, and I could have left. But I gathered courage.

"Would you . . . like a cup of coffee?"

"Father's not here," she began.

"Yes, he is," I stated, as Frank King came in the front door. He grunted a good morning at me, and I grunted one back at him. Then I said to Janey, "Yes?"

She looked across the cashier's counter at me. Her eyes asked questions, apparently found satisfactory answers. She smiled. "Why, yes, Mr. York, I will."

She told her father, emerged from the cashier's cage. As I held open the front door for her, I muttered, "Drew, not Mr. York."

She flung a quick smile over her shoulder. "All right, Drew. And—Janey."

"Yeah," I said, "Drew and Janey."

That was our first cup of coffee together. Every morning since, we've been having them. That's where we were yesterday when the two masked gunmen robbed Frank King of his stacks of gold and silver.

Although the thirty thousand was hardly a dent in his total holdings, Frank King's ire was great because his pet project had been so brutally treated. He told me, "First time anything happens since you took the job, and you're not around. Well, you either find those men and get my money back, or else."

Men don't talk like that to me, unless they want to swallow their teeth. But Janey wouldn't want to see her dad swallow his teeth. So Frank King talked to me like that.

I said, "Or else what?"

"Get out. Get out and stay out."

I didn't ask further explanation. I didn't need any. He didn't mean get out of the marshal's job, he meant get out of the Buttonhook country.

THAT'S what I was thinking as I sat at my office desk, while midnight ticked unstoppably nearer. After looking all my life to find Janey, now I must lose her. For, if I failed, Janey was not the kind to run away with me, even had I been the kind to ask her.

That left only one answer. Somehow I had to recover Frank King's money.

Midnight came, went. I mulled over every word Sig Marly had said, each emotion or action he had displayed.

I caught a long breath as I remembered the last few remarks we had exchanged. I wondered if any of it had made an impression. Would he sleep soundly tonight, or fitfully? I decided to gamble that he would dream—perhaps not much, but at least a little. And maybe that little would be bad, for him.

So I fumbled in my desk for paper and pencil and scrawled a crudely-printed note. From another drawer I removed one of the guns never reclaimed by the fuzz-faced kids. I tied the note in the trigger guard, blew out the office lamp, and locked the front door.

I walked off like I was going home, then crept back and stealthily circled the building. I thought I saw a shadow move, but appar-

ently it was my imagination. No one was there when I checked. I went to my room and to bed.

But I didn't sleep right away. Something didn't seem right. Gradually I was aware that customary night sounds were missing. There was no cricket beneath my open window, no sleepy twitter from birds. Even the leaves of the stalwart mountain cottonwood seemed still. Nor was there from afar the usual coyote cry or lowing of feeding cattle. All was dark and hushed outside, as if heaven and earth waited with bated breath to see how foolish my gamble might be.

I was awake at daylight next morning, but catnapped until nine o'clock, the latest I'd ever stayed in bed. But I wanted everyone in town to be busy at accustomed duties, so they wouldn't see if I'd made a fool of myself.

I arose, dressed leisurely, and strolled to the livery barn.

"Morning, Jim," I said. "Say, I'm going to do some riding today. Think I'll use Marly's horse instead of mine, though. It needs exercise and I've got to collect in some way for the grain and hay it's been eating."

Jim frowned, but didn't offer any comment. I went to the bank. Frank King grunted, then avoided me. Janey searched my face, found failure at recovering the money, and also found something which gave her a wary expression.

I said, "Let's drink some coffee. Then I've got to go to work."

Janey glanced at her father. "Go ahead," he spoke to her, but directed his sarcasm at me. "While you're in off the street, maybe Sig Marly's partner will come back and get the rest of my money."

Intended in-laws can get irksome sometimes. I snapped back at him, "You're not too sure about Sig Marly. You can't positively identify him."

"What more evidence do you need than that bullet wound in his shoulder?"

"Quit it, you two!" exclaimed Janey, and led me from the bank. At the restaurant, I seated her at a table with her back to the street.

"Send breakfast to that fellow in jail. Fred knows where to find the cell key," I told the waitress. "He wants scrambled eggs, a slice of ham, and a pot of coffee. Reckon I'll have the same."

"You haven't eaten yet?" Janey asked in surprise.

"Questioned Marly until almost midnight. So I slept late this morning for a change."

The waitress brought my food, and coffee for Janey. The rstaurant owner left with a covered tray for the jail.

"What did he say?" Janey asked.

"My name's Sig Marly, I'm from Texas, and I accidentally shot myself."

"Oh. Still that."

I nodded, glanced past her. The restaurant man should be coming back, unless he was waiting to bring the tray. I didn't think his delay was because of that. I grinned and felt better than I had since the bank was robbed.

JANEY slowly set her cup down. "You're up to something," she accused.

"No, I'm not." But I kept my gaze averted. It was impossible to lie to Janey, especially if she searched my eyes.

I covertly peeked across the street, and saw the jail door slowly open. A hatbrim cautiously appeared. Satisfied that no one watched, Sig Marly hurried out, sped around the jail. I imagined I could hear hoofbeats racing from town. I leaned back with a pleased grunt.

"This coffee's awfully good," I said. "Let's have some more."

Janey kept staring at me as the waitress refilled our cups.

"Fred's taking his time feeding your prisoner," the woman remarked.

"Maybe he's waiting to bring back the tray." I dallied with my coffee. I figured I had almost an hour to kill. It was about eleven o'clock.

"It's past time for Fred to be back, Mr. York. Do you suppose anything's gone wrong?"

"How could it? Fred's fed him before and nothing went wrong."

"I know, but it isn't like Fred to go off and leave pots boiling on the stove. He's staying longer than he meant to. I'd feel a lot better if you went over and checked on things."

"Yes!" Janey's lips formed a firm line. Her eyes stared straight into mine. I felt she suspected my secret. "Come on, I'll go with you."

In the jail, Fred was stretched out on the cot, locked in the cell. I became alarmed that he might be hurt, which wasn't part of my plan. Then I saw he was only bound and gagged with strips of cot sheet. Sig certainly had taken the bait. I laughed to myself, got

***"See, Dr. Williams isn't so bad, is he?"***

the extra key from my office desk, opened the cell door, and released Fred.

He said, "Marly had a gun and got the drop on me. And his horse was beside the jail in the shade."

"Thanks," I said. "I'll take right out after him. You'd better hurry over to Katie so she'll know you weren't hurt."

After he was gone, Janey spoke accusingly. "You planned this whole thing—the gun, his horse. You deliberately let Sig Marly escape."

"Sure," I said, grinning. "I wrote a note last night, tied it to a gun, and tossed both through Sig's cell window. In the note I pretended I was the other fellow in on the robbery. I told Sig to hurry and get out or else I was taking the money and leaving."

"And?" I didn't like the tone of her voice, nor the glint that came into her eyes.

"Simple. I can track a calf across rocky ground. It will be easy to follow Sig's trail across sandy desert. He'll hurry to where they hid your Dad's gold and silver. I'll arrive about the time he's got it all nicely dug up."

Janey shook her head, and pity swept across her face. She grabbed my arm and led me from the jail.

"Oh, you poor unknowing fool. Look!" she waved broadly toward the southwest sky. "Look and listen."

I didn't hear a thing. I didn't see a thing. There were no birds in the sky, no breeze. Then gradually I did both see and hear. The sky was growing yellow as far and as high as I could see. And there was a sound like wind shrieking through pine trees, so far away it was barely audible, yet ominous with growing intensity. Foreboding brought out a cold sweat on my face.

"You haven't lived here long enough to know," Janey said. "Each year about this time the sand blows, the first always biggest because the whole country is so dry and hot. It usually brings rain, which makes the following blows less fierce. This one has been building up for several days—last night you could almost taste it. But you can't run away or hide. You just wait, conserving strength to tough it out."

That's why everything was so quiet last night. Living things were gathering strength to weather the big blow.

"Good gosh!" I exclaimed. "It'll blow Marly's trail away. I've got to hurry and bring him back."

"There isn't enough time to overtake Marly now. In an hour, even less, the sky will be a sea of blinding sand. But there is one chance. Come on."

But I held back. "You're not going out into that. I'm the cause of this. I'll do it alone."

"Don't be a fool, Drew. Neither you nor your horse have ever been through a desert sandstorm. You can get blinded, even suffocated, if you get panicky in one of them."

But I still demurred. "Where are we going? There won't be any trail to follow."

"The nearest water from here is Button-

hook Spring, ten miles across the flats. It's surrounded by a semi-circle of mountains, clumsily shaped like a buttonhook. That's where Daddy got the name for our ranch. That may be where Sig Marly and his partner stopped after robbing the bank. If so, that's probably where Marly's headed now."

A trickle of excitement grew, but still I wasn't convinced. "You can get lost, too, you know."

"Tell Jim to saddle the big gelding for me. It was born at the Spring and can find its way there through the worst of conditions." She started me toward the barn with a push. "I'll change into sturdier things at the bank. Daddy will raise the roof, but I'm still going with you."

WE WERE caught halfway across the the flats. At first there were wedges of sand, swept up by slivers of wind which surged ahead of the storm like the lead wolves of a savage pack pouncing forward for the kill. Then the wild, hungry storm sucked us into its shrieking maw, and we lost the world.

Sand beat at my hands and neck and ripped across my back like thousands of tiny needles. The wild shriek of the wind made communication impossible. Janey passed me the end of a rope to guide me in following her gelding through the thick, blinding wall. But my horse made no attempt to panic or shy. It seemed to sense that the gelding knew the way to safety, and it followed closely.

Soapweed and mesquite leaped from the murk underfoot, bent by the wind to the breaking point. Cholla and staghorn cowered from the blasting sand, thorny surfaces impotent against this savage force. All around, the desert was riotous with sand and leaves and limbs. Hurtling tumbleweeds banged against us, careened wildly off, vanished into the writhing sandy flow.

For an age, it seemed, we struggled through the smiting force. Then there was a rift in the wind, and bushes and rocks were around us. We went hurriedly farther, and then there was less wind, less noise. The gelding had brought us safely within the protective semi-circle of mountains. Overhead the sand rolled on, deflected by sloping mountains in an endless murky wave. But down here was vision and greenery and breath, and a ribbon-thin trickling stream.

We dismounted and greedily drank, as did our buffeted mounts. I swabbed their nostrils and eyes and ears, shook sand from my holstered gun.

Janey got back in the saddle. "The Spring is about a half mile away. The nearer we approach it, the less sand and wind we'll have. Come on, I'm anxious to see . . ."

But I led the way. Five hundred yards along, two sudden shots rose above the muted sound of the wind. I caught a stir of motion ahead as I hurried our mounts from the narrow pathway and took cover in the underbrush.

"I didn't think Marly would waste two shots at a time," I said, pulling my gun.

But Janey, peeking through the scrub cedar, exclaimed in alarm. "Drew, there are two of them—Sig Marley and another man. They're splitting apart and starting toward us from different directions."

I glanced through her peephole and swore. Probably Marly's partner had never fled from this vicinity. Perhaps he had waited for Marly to gain strength and escape, or for opportunity to effect Marly's rescue. Possibly last night, as I tossed the gun through Marly's cell window, the partner watched from the shadows, laughing at my foolish plan.

Whatever the explanation, one fact remained frighteningly inescapable. Both were armed and were creeping toward us through the underbrush. They'd kill us, then escape with the two heavy bags of coins they'd dug up near the spring. Their trail would vanish in the storm, as would Frank King's money. But that would be no concern to Janey and me, for we'd be dead as soon as the two men found us.

Retreat was impossible. The moment we left our hiding place we'd be exposed full view to them. We'd be like sitting ducks on a pond, cut down without half a chance.

INANELY, I said to Janey, taking her hand in mine, "I had meant to apply for the ranch manager's job until this mess came up. I wasn't cut out to wear a star, but I know cattle as well as any man."

She returned the pressure. "I knew all along you'd apply for the job, and I was thinking that you and I . . . Well, I never want to leave the ranch, Drew."

A drop of wetness struck my hand, then another. I thought perhaps Janey was crying. I glanced at her. She gave me a tremulous smile, but she was not crying. I looked up at the sand-laden sky, and drops of muddy wetness struck my face. I remembered then that Janey had said rain usually came with the first big blow.

A wild idea surged through my mind, and my grip on her small hand tightened.

"Janey, do you think it will rain right away?"

My excitement caught and engulfed her. "Yes, in just a few minutes. Perhaps ten—fifteen at the most. Why, Drew? What have you got in mind?"

I was fumbling in my pocket. "I'm going to build a fire in this dead underbrush. The wind will blow the flames toward Sig Marly and his partner. They'll have to get to their horses and escape past us, or run the chance of being burned. They'll be out in the open then!" I scooped up a mound of dry leaves and branches, then bent and struck a match.

"But the trees . . ." Janey started to protest.

"That's where the rain comes in. I figure it will put out the fire before it gets beyond control. I don't want to burn living timber any more than you do, but it may be our only chance."

After a moment she said, "Give me some matches and I'll help."

The wind quickly fanned the tiny pyres of fire into a searing inferno. Sig Marly yelled in alarm, his partner echoed a string of oaths. Beside the spring, their horses began to snort and stomp.

The two men raced back to their mounts, aware that they must escape quickly. Already flames were sweeping greedily toward them. They piled the heavy sacks across saddle fronts, climbed up, and spurred their mounts. They drew guns as they sped toward us, heat reddening their faces, smoke billowing about them in surging waves.

I drew my gun, crouched down. Almost together we fired. There were two shots from each of their guns, two shots from mine. But they were astride bounding, fire-crazed horses, and missed. I was on solid ground, and didn't.

Panicked by the fire, and the flame from my gun almost in their faces, the two horses hurtled on madly. But the bank robbers did not go along. They slumped from their saddles and pitched lifelessly to the ground. The two bags thudded down.

I holstered my gun and turned to Janey. The rain washed sand from the sky in a growing, welcome deluge. The spreading fire sizzled in a smoulder of smoke. Magically the atmosphere was cleared, except for the pounding rain.

I drew Janey beneath the shelter of a thick scrub cedar, raised her chin, and kissed her. It was a simple, gentle kiss, but it conveyed the great love I had for this woman.

After moments of heady intensity, she leaned back and smiled up at me. "About that ranch manager's job—your application is accepted, Mr. Drew York."

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*Coming up in the next issue*

## Rifles West

***Danzer had to safeguard a doomed wagon train . . . with no help***

**A Magazine-Length Novel**

**By THEODORE J. ROEMER**

## Girl on the Tomahawk

***Only one woman could make Calligan forget to play it safe***

**A Western Novelette**

**By RAY GAULDEN**

# The Vengeance

***CLARA WAS BORN to make trouble . . . and her flirtation with Brandon set off the spark that would drench the whole range in blood. . . .***

**PART ONE**

THREE horsemen appeared in the south and aimed toward Tom McVey's cow camp on Deer Creek. When they drew close enough to be identified as white men, McVey knew that trouble was in the making. White men seldom brought anything else to an Indian reservation. And these three might be those he had been expecting for nearly three months: the vengeance riders.

He stepped into the old Army tent that was his only shelter, then reappeared wearing his gun-rig and carrying a Winchester rifle.

He was a tall man of about thirty, big-boned but carrying

# Riders

by JACK BARTON

on his frame nothing but hard muscle. His features were good, but too rugged for handsomeness. He had faded blond hair, smoke-gray eyes, skin weathered a deep bronze. He wore high-heeled boots with seventeen-inch stitched tops, pants of gray California cloth, and a fringed buckskin shirt that was the handiwork of some patient Crow squaw. His hat was a flat-crowned, broad-brimmed Stetson.

He watched the oncoming horsemen with hard-eyed intensity until they were close enough for him to recognize them. Then he heaved a sigh of relief. They were not those he had expected, not men wanting his life. They were merely bringing him word of the others.

They forded the Deer in single file, old Pat Higgins in the lead. Stocky Chris Nolan was second, dour-faced Milt Jessup, third. They reined in just beyond McVey's dying cookfire, all three solemn of expression.

Old Higgins said, "Well, it's come."

"How bad?"

"As bad as you'd expect trouble that comes out of Texas," Higgins said. "A blowhard named Matthew Brandon—boot-tough, wolf-mean. He sired the whelp who was killed three months ago. He's got two more sons, and they're with him. So are a dozen Texas gunhands. It's a rough enough crew to rip this range apart like a tornado out of hell. Brandon wants the man who killed his youngest son. He heard that you did the killing. The way he wants you is with a rope around your neck."

"There's no reasoning with him?"

"No."

"Well, it had to come. We knew Russ had kin who'd want to avenge him."

"We knew it. Now it's up to us to get them over wanting to avenge him."

McVey regarded the old man with sudden curiosity. "You got some idea how that can be done?"

"I've got the idea," Higgins replied. "I don't know if it'll work, though. Right now that Texas crowd is camped outside Riverbend, running out of patience. Brandon knows where you are, and he'd be on his way here now if some of us hadn't bargained with him. We told him that you'd have to be given a trial. We said we'd bring you to town for the trial, and gave him to understand that if he didn't agree we'd fight him every step of his way up here to Crow country. None of us has any stomach for a fight with that crowd, but he couldn't know that. So he gave in."

"The trial won't be legal."

"Maybe not, since we've got no organized courts," Higgins said. "It'll have to be a kangaroo court. But it'll serve the purpose, and Brandon will have to abide by its decision."

He lifted a gnarled hand, gestured toward his companions. "We're your witnesses. We'll swear that we saw the gun fight. We'll testify that Russ Brandon forced it on you, that he drew first and fired the first shot, and that you killed him to save your own life. Self-defense. We'll get Brandon over wanting to hang you."

McVEY looked at each man in turn. "You're going to lie for me?"

Nolan and Jessup nodded. Higgins said, "It's all planned. And it's the best we can do, unless—" he eyed McVey hopefully— "unless you've changed your mind about not running."

"Sorry to disappoint you, Pat," McVey said, "but I'm not running. I've got too much at stake—here on the Deer and down at my ranch in the Powder River country."

"Well, you can't just squat here and wait for that crowd to come after you," Higgins said. "Alone you wouldn't have a Chinaman's chance against those Texans. So you'll have to play it our way. And we'd better get started."

McVey nodded, but said, "There's just one thing. If this Matthew Brandon catches on that you three are lying for me, you'll be in it as deep as I am. Have you thought of that?"

Chris Nolan said, "We'll take our chances," And Milt Jessup added, "That's why we're here, to see you through from start to finish."

McVey said, "Just so you know," and turned toward the rope corral in which his four horses were penned. He saddled a stocky dun gelding and turned the others out onto the range. He booted his rifle, tied his

blanket-roll and a skimpy warsack behind the saddle cantle. He mounted and said, "All right, let's go."

They forded the creek and aimed south toward the Wyoming line. They passed McVey's Durham-strain steers, already fat on the abundant reservation graze, and his companions eyed the cattle with envy. Their own stock was not faring so well, due to the overcrowding of the Powder River range and to other disturbing conditions in that part of the country.

McVey knew that there were ranchers who would sell their souls for a range such as this within the Crow Reservation. He'd come by it through a stroke of good fortune and some skillful diplomacy. He'd been one of the first cattlemen to settle in the Powder River country, and once he'd given a half-dozen beeves to a band of half-starved Crows. And the Crows had never forgotten. Yes, he'd been lucky—until he ran afoul of a certain Russ Brandon.

They lifted their horses to a lope that covered distance rapidly without tiring the animals. They spoke not at all now, but rode in a stony contemplation, each man in his own way, of what might happen if the Texans, by some accident, suspected that they were being entangled in a spider's web of lies.

They put up that night at the headquarters of Bar Z Ranch, a dozen miles south of the Montana-Wyoming line, and spent the following night with the Barton brothers' Two-B outfit in the shadow of the Granite Mound bluffs. At mid-afternoon of the third day they reached Riverbend.

They were no longer but four. Friends and neighbors had joined them along the way—singly, in pairs, in small groups—until there was a band of nearly thirty riders.

It made quite a cavalcade, but not so formidable a force as it seemed. A number of the men were making the trip merely out of curiosity, and as many more considered it something of a lark. Several were teen-age kids, others creaky oldtimers; extreme youth and extreme age would make them unreliable in a pinch.

Besides the three who had come to his camp, McVey felt certain that no more than half a dozen could be counted upon in a showdown. Still, the Texans more might be awed by numbers—and that, McVey reflected, would be in his favor.

The road twisted through low wooded hills, then was carried across the Powder by a plank bridge. The wooden span gave off a thunderous racket under the pounding of so many shod hoofs, and now townspeople appeared at windows and doorways to watch the McVey faction come in. The people of Riverbend knew, of course, that trouble was in the air.

From the bridge McVey saw that Main Street was all but empty of men, and that none of the few who were in sight were strangers who might belong to the Brandon crowd. He could see the Texans' camp, a quarter of a mile south.

IT SEEMED to McVey that there was fear in the atmosphere of Riverbend. The absence of townspeople from the streets, and their anxious faces at windows and doorways, gave substance to the feeling. It was understandable. Two big groups of armed men at odds and about to clash must seem to these people like a powder keg that a tiny spark might touch off into a terrific explosion.

George Stacey appeared in the doorway of his Riverbend Bank, across the street, and even at that distance McVey could see the troubled frown on the banker's rather handsome face. Their glances met, and McVey dipped his head in a slight nod in an attempt to tell Stacey, who had a stake in this grim game, not to worry.

At that moment Stacey's wife, Clara appeared beside him. Clara had once been Clara Higgins; she was old Pat's daughter. There'd been a time when McVey himself had been one of her suitors. He gave her a sharp glance now, wondering how she was taking it. Her face was expressionless, but in her eyes was a gleam of excitement. He thought, so that's all it means to you! Anger stirred in him.

It was because of Clara Higgins Stacey that this trouble had developed—though that was something very few people knew. It was something that the Texan, Matthew Brandon, was not to know. That was agreed.

But McVey found himself thinking, is she really worth it?

At his side, Pat Higgins said, "Clara's taking it hard."

McVey said, "Yes?" and let it go at that.

They reached the Territorial Saloon. The Territorial was Riverbend's largest gathering place for riding men; the miners from the nearby diggings preferred another saloon, and the lumberjacks, when they came in from the logging camps in the hills, yet another. It was tacitly understood, at least by the Powder River men, that the kangaroo trial would be held in the Territorial.

The town's two main streets formed a T, and the saloon was located on Main so that it looked out on South Street. And now the Texans were coming along South, walking their horses. McVey, seeing them, felt a tightness in his chest. Perhaps fear was at work in him, for there were more men in the Brandon crowd than Pat Higgins had said.

Matthew Brandon, his two sons, and a dozen gunhands, Higgins had told him—fifteen men. There were six more than Brandons' Wyoming ranch—called XO Ranch, because of its brand—which Russ Brandon had ramrodded until his death. McVey knew all of them by sight, and several quite well. They were tough hands.

On reaching Main Street, they fanned out in one long row abreast with Brandon—at least, McVey supposed the man who dominated the group must be Matthew Brandon—in its center. They faced McVey and the men surrounding him, and their leader's chill gaze instantly singled out McVey.

Brandon loomed tall in the saddle, his craggy face partially masked by an iron-gray mustache, a spade beard. He was case-hardened by at least sixty rigorous years. His pale gray eyes glinted coldly, like steel. His hands now resting on his saddlehorn, he leaned forward the better to study McVey.

"You in the buckskin shirt." His voice boomed in the heavy quiet. "You're McVey?"

"I'm McVey, Brandon."

"You're the man who killed my youngest son?"

"I'm the man."

Brandon's face twisted with quick hatred. "Your friends have kept their part of the bargain, bringing you here," he said. "Now I'll keep my part. I'll give you a hearing. This is your trial, McVey. You've admitted killing my boy Russ. If you want to plead self-defense, go ahead. It'll do you no good. I'm going to prove that you murdered my son in cold blood. And after it's proved, I'm going to hang you up by the neck until you're dead—no matter what your friends say or do. And may God have mercy on your rotten soul!"

Tom McVey felt the chill touch of fear. These rough words from the Texan were not empty ones. Brandon meant what he said. And this too McVey knew: the men would not be easily duped. It would be difficult to lie to him.

Pat Higgins was saying, "We'll hold the trial inside, Brandon, where there'll be less chance of either side turning it into a shooting match."

Brandon turned his knife-sharp gaze on him. "Higgins, you sure like to call the tune. Watch out that you're not called on to pay the piper."

"It's our range, and, by damn, we'll make the rules."

"You're forgetting that the Brandon Cattle Company has a stake in it."

"I'm forgetting nothing," Brandon replied. "But your having a ranch here doesn't change the fact that you yourself are an outsider. As a stranger, mister, you'll play the game our way. We're going inside. If you want to put McVey on trial, come along." He turned to McVey, took his arm. "Let's go, Tom."

THE Territorial's owner, dapper Faro Ed Walsh, stopped them to say, "McVey, you boys are always welcome here. That you know. But I don't want my place turned into a shooting gallery."

McVey nodded. "There'll be no trouble if I can help it. But if things get out of hand, I'll pay you for any damages."

He moved back through the long room and took a chair at the extreme rear. He took out makings and began fashioning a cigarette, watching Higgins line the members of their party along the right side of

*McVey sent his horse down, and midway the dun lost its footing*

the room and against the wall. Matthew Brandon entered with his tough-visaged men and, with a wave of his hand, ordered them to line up along the bar.

Higgins came back to McVey and whispered, "Something's up. He didn't bring his sons in with him."

McVey nodded. "He's tricky, that's sure. Better stand over with the others, Pat. If he pulls something, I want plenty of room."

He lighted his cigarette, calm on the surface but mentally squirming under the baleful gaze of Matthew Brandon. The Texan stood at the rear end of the bar, his back to it and his thumbs hooked in the cartridge-studded belt of his gun-rig. Finally, with the last man in his place, the room took on a tense quiet.

Brandon let the silence stretch thin, then said, "You're a cool customer, McVey—sitting there smoking a cigarette like you've got a clear conscience."

McVey smiled thinly. "I'm the man on trial, so it's not up to me to start proceedings. You make the charge against me and try to prove my killing your son was murder. When you're through I'll have my defense ready."

Brandon nodded. "So be it," he said. Then, ringingly: "I here and now charge that on the afternoon of April 13, 1883 you did waylay and kill in cold blood and without justification one Russ Brandon. I'll call a witness." He glanced at his men along the bar. "Tip Ryan!"

The man who stepped forward was an XO hand, a youngish man but marked by the toughness that seemed to be a requisite for a Brandon rider.

Brandon said, "Tell it, Tip, like you told me."

Ryan was self-conscious and slow to get started, but finally he spoke up. "There was bad blood between Russ and this McVey. It came about when Russ heard that McVey

was going to move steers up to the Crow Reservation. The range around here is crowded with outfits. Everybody's chasing around branding out of season and hunting mavericks, disturbing the cattle all the time and keeping them from putting on tallow. Then there's the rustlers.

"Anyway, Russ heard that McVey shipped better beef and got higher prices last fall than anybody around these parts. So Russ figured he could get some graze up there. He went to the Crow Agency but got turned down. He blamed McVey. He figured that McVey was such good friends with the Indians that he could keep other cattlemen out of the Reservation."

Ryan paused for breath, then continued, "About ten days before Russ was shot dead, the two of us were here in Riverbend. We ran into this hombre—" with a jerk of his head he indicated McVey— "over at the livery stable. Russ accused him of keeping XO Ranch from making a deal with the Indians. McVey denied it. Russ lost his temper and—"

Ryan was interrupted by a voice shouting, "Open up, here! Make way, damn it!"

Some townsmen had overcome their fear and were now blocking the doorway, trying to hear what was being said inside. As they moved aside, Brandon's sons escorted a woman dressed all in black into the saloon. Matthew Brandon faced these newcomers.

"Luke, bring Linda here," he ordered. "Jess, fetch a chair for her."

McVey stared. All the Powder River men stared.

One Brandon son brought the woman through the room, her hand on his arm. The other got a chair from one of the tables. She was seated near Matthew Brandon, facing McVey. She had brought with her a large leather-bound book, which she now placed in her lap. She lifted the veil that covered her face, fixed it back over her hat. She was quite young and strikingly beautiful.

To McVey it was obvious that she was in mourning attire, for Russ Brandon. And he wondered whether she was his sister, sweetheart or wife.

This was trickery indeed. McVey looked at Matthew Brandon with sudden anger, and said, "Brandon, did you have to make this worse than it already was?"

"This shouldn't bother you, McVey—if you're not guilty."

"This is no place for a woman."

"It is for this woman," Brandon shot back. "She is Russ's widow."

There were surprised comments from the Powder River men, and McVey himself, even though he had guessed the woman might be the dead man's widow, was jolted. It had not been known on this range that Russ Brandon was married.

The woman ignored everyone else and gazed intently at McVey. He squirmed mentally, knowing that her presence would make it doubly hard for him to lie.

BRANDON said, "Tip, get on with your testimony."

"Well, Russ got mad," Ryan said. "He called McVey some names. Russ told him he must have a squaw up there, else he wouldn't be such good friends with the Crows. McVey told him to shut up. That's when Russ jumped him. I've got to admit that Russ started the fight. It wasn't much of a set-to, though. This McVey is a tough customer. He hit Russ twice and rolled him in the dirt."

McVey saw the woman wince. It was as though she could feel his fists slamming into her husband.

Ryan went on, "Russ was crazy mad by that time. He got to his knees and one hand, and pulled his gun with the other hand. He fired a shot, but he was groggy and it went wild. Before he could fire again, McVey walked in on him and kicked the gun out of his hand."

"That was the end of it?" Brandon asked.

"That day, yeah," Ryan said. "But later McVey killed Russ."

Pat Higgins broke in, "Hold on. I'm going cross-examine the witness." He moved two steps in Ryan's direction. Then: "When Russ fired that shot, did McVey shoot back?"

"Well, no."

"But he could have pulled his gun instead of kicking Russ's gun out of his hand?"

"I reckon so."

Higgins looked at Matthew Brandon. "It's

clear that if McVey had wanted your son dead, he could have killed him then—in self-defense. You agree?"

Brandon scowled. "I'll agree only that he didn't kill my son that day. I claim that after he thought it over he decided to pay Russ back for branding him a liar and a squawman—and he paid him back by killing him." He gestured at Ryan. "Tell the rest of it."

The XO hand said. "After Russ cooled off and McVey was gone, Russ got scared. He realized that McVey could have killed him. He said that McVey was too tough, that he wouldn't tangle with him again. Then on the thirteenth of April, toward sundown, McVey and old Higgins brought poor Russ to XO headquarters. Russ's body was tied across the saddle of his horse.

"McVey claimed that he'd met Russ on the town road and Russ drew on him and that he'd had to kill Russ to save his own life. I knew he was lying, because I knew Russ had been too scared of him to brace him in a gun fight."

Brandon said, "You figured Russ had been killed in cold blood?"

"Yes, sir."

"You looked at Russ's gun?"

Ryan nodded. "There was a fired cartridge in it. McVey claimed that was proof that Russ fired on him first. Me, I figure that McVey fired a shot out of Russ's gun after the killing to make it look good for himself."

"You're sure Russ was too scared of McVey to pick a fight with him?"

"Mr. Brandon, I don't like to make out that your son had a yellow streak," Ryan said, "but McVey sure did have the Injun sign on him. A couple of days after the fight, Russ and I saw McVey on the range. Russ headed in another direction right away, saying that he didn't want to run into that hombre again."

"He feared for his life, then? He feared McVey would kill him?"

Ryan hedged on that. "Well . . . maybe."

Higgins started to object, accusing Brandon of trying to put words into the witness's mouth. McVey said, "Take it easy Pat. I'll handle this."

He looked at Brandon, said, "I bore Russ no grudge. I roughed him up that day at the livery stable only because he jumped me—not because he called me names. I had no reason to kill him then or later. To my mind, Russ was just a loud-mouthed punk. I wasn't afraid of him and I wouldn't benefit by his death.

"The day I ran into him at the Hatchet Creek ford—" he weighed his words now, for this was the untruth— "he started abusing me again about his not being able to lease graze from the Crows. He got riled up and finally pulled his gun. He fired one shot, then I drew and fired before he could shoot a second time. It was his life or mine."

"You'd swear to that, would you?"

"I'd swear to it. Better still, I have three witnesses who—"

Brandon cut in, "Come over here, mister."

McVey eyed him uncertainly as the gaunt Texan stepped over beside his son's widow. Rising, McVey walked toward the two and, out of regard for the woman, removed his hat. Her eyes remained on him with that steady intensity. They were a gold-flecked brown. Her face was pallid, but her complexion was flawless; her pallor came of the strain she was under, he realized. Her hair a rich black. Russ Brandon had indeed been married to a beautiful woman.

MATTHEW BRANDON said, his voice gentle now, "Linda hold it up for him."

She lifted the book, and upon its leather cover was inscribed in gold letters, "Holy Bible."

Brandon said, "Well, McVey?"

McVey hesitated.

Brandon said, "You can't do it, can you?" He glanced around at the two rows of silent, staring men. "You see? The man's lied. He's afraid to swear on the Good Book."

McVey hesitated no longer. He placed his left hand on the Book, raised his right. His face was rock hard, his voice too loud. "I swear that what I've said happened between Russ Brandon and myself is the truth—so help me, God."

The woman named Linda said, in a shocked tone, "How could you? Is there nothing too evil for you to do?"

Her words stung, and McVey could no longer meet her accusing eyes. This was the worst moment of the trial so far, and he felt relieved when a commotion at the door ended it.

A second woman was now entering the Territorial, and her appearance had caused some noisy speculation among the townsmen jamming the doorway. Faro Ed Walsh questioned her, then faced about and spoke to Tom McVey and Matthew Brandon.

"The lady says her son witnessed Russ's death," Welsh said. "You two want to hear what the boy has to say?"

Brandon said, "Send them over here. Maybe we'll hear some truth for a change."

McVey had to go along with it. He nodded. He felt a sharp alarm, for until this moment he had not known that there had been a witness to the killing of Russ Brandon. He glanced at Pat Higgins and saw that the old man too was rattled.

The woman came through the room, followed by her son. She wore a gray gingham dress and a sunbonnet, a sturdy homesteader woman. The boy was in his early teens, a yellow-haired kid in bib overalls. McVey knew them. Tunstall was their name, and the family homesteaded out on Hatchet Creek. The head of the family, Henry Tunstall, was a dirt farmer by summer and an odd-jobs man by winter.

Although hostile to other settlers, most of the ranchers liked and respected the Tunstall. Quite a few had hired him at one time or another to do carpentry work.

Evidently feeling that the boy's testimony would refute McVey's version of Russ's death, Brandon looked expectant. He had one of his sons get a chair for Mrs. Tunstall. The woman was seated near Linda Brandon, and the boy stood by her.

Brandon said, "Now what would your name be, madam?"

"Mrs. Henry Tunstall. And my son's name is Will."

"And your Will saw Russ Brandon murdered?"

"Yes, he did."

Brandon gave McVey a jubilant look, then turned to Pat Higgins. "You're the spokesman for your crowd," he said. "I want you to say if you know the Tunstalls to be honest folks."

Higgins's voice was heavy with defeat, proof that he expected the worst. "They're honest. I know the boy. He's been raised right. But he's just a kid. He could be mistaken. Maybe he didn't see what he thinks he saw."

Mrs. Tunstall said rebukingly, "Mr. Higgins, you know my Will is very bright for his age. He wouldn't make a mistake about anything so important."

"Yea, ma'm, but—"

McVey said, "Pat, let it go."

Brandon chuckled. "Yeah, let it go. You can't make out that this young man is an idiot. I've never laid eyes on him until now, but I can see that he's smart as a whip." He lay a friendly hand on Will's shoulder. "Son, did you see Russ Brandon murdered?"

The boy swallowed visibly, embarrassed, but said, "Yes, sir, I saw it."

"Tell us about it."

"Well, my pa sent me over to Mr. Jessup's ranch that morning to fix the roof on his cabin. Pa was busy. He'd just started some plowing. He said it was a job I could do, just nailing down some shingles. Well, I did the job and I was on my way home that afternoon when I saw it."

"Where was this, son?"

"Along Hatchet Creek, close to the town road. That's about halfway between Mr. Jessup's place and home. I was walking along with my tool box on my shoulder. I saw two riders on the road, near the ford." Will had overcome his bashfulness and now spoke out like a grown-up. "One had his back my way, but I saw right off that the other was Russ Brandon from XO Ranch. I thought they were talking friendly, but all of a sudden there was a shot—loud as anything." The boy's eyes grew round, as though he were seeing it again and was again frightened. "I saw Mr. Brandon fall off his horse. I was so scared I dropped by tool box."

"Go on," Brandon said. "What happened then?"

"The other man rode off. He still had his gun in his hand."

"There was just one shot?"

"Yes, sir."

"Which way did the killer go?"

"He crossed the creek and headed north, riding fast," Will said. "When he was gone, I picked up my tool box and went to where Mr. Brandon was. He was dead, all right. I didn't stop. I was still scared. When I got home, I told my folks. Pa went off to see if Mr. Brandon was maybe still alive, even though I was sure he wasn't.

"When Pa came back, he said there was nothing anybody could do. He said too that we'd better forget what I saw—not tell a soul. Pa said it was most likely a cattlemen's feud, and homesteader folks would only get into trouble by getting mixed up in it."

BRANDON was no longer so friendly toward Will. "Why isn't you pa here?" he demanded.

It was Mrs. Tunstall who answered, explaining that her husband didn't know what was happening here today. The foreman of a logging outfit had wanted him to build a shed, and Tunstall would be in the hills for several days.

"My son and I heard about this trouble from one of Mr. Jessup's ranchhands who happened by our place this morning. We worried, trying to decide what was right for us to do. It seemed that we should come and let Will tell what he saw. Being homesteader folks, maybe we should have stayed away. But . . . well, we hoped it wouldn't make trouble for us Tunstalls."

"Madam, I'd think more of you homesteader folks if your husband had taken my son's body home to XO Ranch instead of letting it lie there on the road."

"My husband knew the body would be taken care of, Mr. Brandon," the woman said. "Two riders came along while he was at the creek ford. My husband hid in the bushes, fearing to be found with the dead man. He watched to make sure the riders did something about your son. They put the body on a horse and headed toward XO Ranch."

"Who were these men?"

"Tom McVey and Pat Higgins."

"What else did your man say about it?"

"Nothing else. That is all."

"Not by a long shot is it all!" Brandon exploded. "Your son saw one of that pair—either McVey or Higgins—take my son's revolver and fire a shot with it."

Mrs. Tunstall was startled. "Yes—yes, he did."

Brandon gave McVey a wicked look. Then, "Which man fired the shot, ma'm?"

"My husband said it was McVey."

Tom McVey no longer maintained his show of calmness. His face was tight with strain. Sweat beaded his forehead.

Brandon said roughly, "Kid, you see that man?" He pointed at McVey, his arm extended full length. "He's the man you saw shoot down Russ Brandon. Right?"

"No, sir. That's not so."

"Kid, I'm warning you—"

Mrs. Tunstall rose and put her arm about the boy. She was defiant, facing Matthew Brandon. "Will has told the truth. If Tom McVey were the man, Will would say so. But it was a man he didn't know." Her voice rose so that it reached everyone in the room. "It was not Tom McVey who murdered young Mr. Brandon. And that's what we came here to say."

Brandon stared at mother and son for a long moment, then shook his fist at McVey. "You rigged this," he shouted. "You put them up to it!"

Russ's widow hastily rose and placed a hand on his arm. "No, Dad. The boy and his mother have told the truth. I know it, and I think you must know it."

He pulled away, swung around, struck the top of the bar a mighty blow with his fist. Then: "McVey, you lying son!" He was so beside himself with rage that his voice failed him for a moment. "You're covering up for the man who did murder my son!" He whirled to face Pat Higgins. "And you're in cahoots with him!"

He raged on, "I'll get at the truth if I have to tear this range apart. I've a hunch that the guilty man is somebody important. You wouldn't be shielding him if he were a nobody. So he'll be easy to find. And find him I will. I'm Matthew Brandon, and no man is so important that he can murder my son and get away with it!"

He turned on his heel, strode to the doorway. The gaping townsmen there scattered to let him pass. But he faced about at the door and looked back at McVey.

"As for you, mister," he said, "I'll have an extra rope ready for you when the time comes."

He went out on that, leaving behind him a silence that seemed charged with his fury. After a moment his men started filing from the saloon. The two younger Brandons waited for Russ's widow, however. She lingered, looking at McVey in a troubled way.

He forced himself to meet her gaze, and a strange thing happened within him. He looked upon this woman and she was somehow more wonderful to his eyes than any woman he'd ever known. He found himself wondering what it would be like to know her well, to know her as intimately as Russ Brandon had known her.

She spoke finally, without hatred or anger. "You'd better think this over and decide that you're doing wrong. For it is wrong. There is nothing right about shielding a murderer." She paused as though expecting him to reply. When he said nothing, she continued, "I'm staying at the hotel. Come see me when you're ready. Tell me the name of the guilty man, and I'll see that no harm comes to you at the hands of the Brandons."

He still said nothing. She turned away and left the place, followed by the Brandon brothers.

THE men who'd come to town with McVey lingered in the Territorial long after the Texans rode from town. They gave Faro Ed Walsh some business, and over their drinks they rehashed the whole sorry mess. The majority of them were mystified. Besides McVey, only three of the group—Pat Higgins, Chris Nolan and Milt Jessup—knew why McVey had admitted responsibility in Russ Brandon's death, and whom he was shielding. And those three kept the secret.

McVey sat at a table, not drinking and not really listening to the talk. He wondered if Matthew Brandon did not have a right to know the truth. He was disturbed, not so much by the gaunt old Texan, he realized, but by Linda Brandon. He could understand that she would want her husband's killer brought to justice. But he knew that the truth must not come out. He must not be swayed by the plea of a woman who could never mean anything to him.

After a time Pat Higgins joined him, bringing a bottle and two shot glasses. The old man filled the glasses, set one before McVey. "Drink up, Tom. It's medicine you need."

McVey downed the whisky, but said, "That's no cure-all, Pat. You know, I've been thinking of the woman—Russ's widow. It's rough on her, Pat."

Higgins's leathery face tightened. "I keep thinking of somebody else," he said. "That widow isn't the only woman concerned." He was silent a moment, brooding. Then: "If Russ had a woman of his own . . . well, what ailed him, anyway?" Getting no answer, he said, "How long are you hanging around here?"

"Until dark," McVey told him. "I want to see George and Clara, but I don't want to go around to their house until I can make it without being seen. I don't want anybody to begin to wonder."

"Better not stay in town too long," Higgins said. "Those Texans aren't done with you. That Matthew Brandon's got a devil in him."

"In his boots, I'd have one in me," McVey said. "Pat, he'll try to get hold of me—to force me to talk. I'm not letting him catch me. When he finds that out, he'll come after you." He saw fear in the old man's eyes. "You'd better drop from sight until this blows over. Let your cowhands look out for your outfit. Take a trip somewhere."

Higgins nodded, saying, "If only that homesteader woman and her kid had kept away."

"Yeah," said McVey. "If only. . . ."

By sundown most of his crowd had quit Riverbend, and at nightfall the remainder—except for Higgins, Nolan and Jessep—prepared to ride out. Those three, left alone with McVey in the Territorial, began to show some impatience, and then some uneasiness when two XO hands came into the saloon.

Higgins prodded McVey then, saying, "It's dark enough now, Tom."

McVey roused from his gloomy reverie, picked up his hat, rose. The others fell in

behind him as he headed for the door. They halted when one of the XO men, Len Macklin, swung away from the bar and stopped McVey.

Macklin nodded toward the three men. "These hombres would have been your witnesses?"

"That's right."

"Some gall, McVey. The whole range knows these men are close friends of yours."

"Let it drop, Len. The trial's over."

"Sure," said Macklin, moving back to the bar. "We'll let it drop—for now. But don't get the idea that Matt Brandon will forget you and your tinhorn witnesses."

McVey ignored that, strode from the place. The others were in a hurry now to get away from Riverbend, and so no time was wasted in getting their mounts at the livery stable. They rode at a brisk pace to the bridge, across it, and along the dark road through the hills.

Once out of sight of the town's lights, McVey said, "See you boys tomorrow," and reined in.

He waited until the darkness had swallowed them, then left the road and quartered up a slope. It was a hard climb, and he halted upon reaching the crest of the slope to let his horse rest for a minute. He'd no sooner stopped, however, when he heard the sound of riders laboring up the slope. He twisted in the saddle, looking back and down. There were two of them. The distance was too great for him to identify them, even when they emerged from the timber and crossed a patch of moonlight, but he knew they were the two XO hands who'd come to the Territorial.

They'd had a drink, then started out for XO Ranch—leaving town imemdiately after he and his three companions rode out. They'd been coming along the road when he left Pat Higgins and the other two, seen him climb into the hills, and now hoped to overtake him. They'd like to turn him over to Brandon.

He touched spurs to the dun, intending to give them a run for their money.

HE DESCENDED into a little valley and set out across it at a lope. The XO men spotted him from the hill as they topped it. They began to push their mounts, shortening his lead. He climbed again, then traveled along a pine-studded ridge. The timber was so dense that he worked his way through it with difficulty. Then the ridge ended abruptly in a bald, steep slope.

He sent his horse downward, and midway the dun lost its footing and fell hard. McVey threw himself clear of the animal, but landed on his left side among some rocks. Pain knifed through him, and for a long moment he lay stunned. When he was able to rise, he saw that the dun had scrambled to its feet and was continuing downslope, with rocks and gravel giving way beneath its hoofs in a sizable landslide. At that instant he heard a rider reach the edge of the slope above him.

The rider shouted, "Here he is, Chick. We've got him!"

McVey recognized the rider by his voice: Len Macklin, the XO man who'd accosted him as he was leaving the Territorial Saloon. He started after his horse, hearing the second rider, Chick, join the first. The ground shifted beneath him at every running stride, and soon he was a part of a small landslide. It tripped him, near the bottom of the slope, and he fell hard again. He rolled and tumbled the remainder of the way.

A gleeful shout, "Got him!" reached him from above.

They started the treacherous descent as he picked himself up. They picked their way, however, and their caution gave McVey a chance to get his bearings. The dun stood twenty feet away, and he moved toward it on wobbly legs.

Len Macklin yelled, "Drop him, Chick! Plug him in a leg!"

McVey threw himself to the ground as one of the pair opened fire. He heaved over in a roll, then leaped up as two more shots racketed. The dun was spooked by the gunfire and shied away, but he managed to grab his Winchester from its saddle boot. The XO riders held their fire now, since his horse kept them from catching him in the sights of their guns.

He dived into a brush thicket. Another shot roared, the slug ripping through the bushes. He jacked a cartridge into the rifle's firing chamber and beaded the man furthest downslope. He squeezed the trigger and both

man and horse went down. The slug had caught the animal in the head, dropping it in its tracks. The man—it was the one called Chick—failed to get clear of the dead horse. He lay pinned beneath it.

His voice rose in a shriek. "Len, get me out of here!"

McVey worked the Winchester's lever, caught Macklin in its sights, began to squeeze the trigger. He eased up on the pressure, just short of tripping the hammer, and let the tension within him escape in a lusty sigh. He had no real quarrel with these two, and there was now no need to kill them. He lowered the rifle.

"Macklin! You hear me, Macklin?"

Len Macklin reined in near where Chick lay helpless. "I hear you, McVey."

"Call it quits," McVey said. "Don't make me kill you."

Macklin swore, but said, "All right. Go your way."

McVey came warily from the thicket, caught up his horse, and, still keeping an eye on the XO man, led the dun away. When beyond bullet range, he mounted and rode on through the hills. Only when lost to Macklin's sight and certain the man was not following him did he turn in the direction of Riverbend. He was still shaky from his encounter with the XO men when he saw the lights of the town .

At the start of the trouble, three months ago, it had seemed a small thing for him to say, "I'll take the blame." It had been public knowledge that Russ Brandon had made one attempt to kill him, and it had seemed logical that people would believe he had made a second try and that McVey had killed him in self-defense. Now he knew that it was no small thing.

He'd taken responsibility for Russ Brandon's death because of his friendship for the people involved—George Stacey, his wife Clara, and old Pat Higgins. He'd been at the Higgins ranch the day Stacey appeared there and blurted out that he'd shot Russ. Reaction had set in; Stacey, his nerve gone, was shaking like a man with a high fever. And he'd laid it at their doorstep, so to speak.

They'd not been surprised, Pat Higgins and he. They'd know that Stacey had been brooding about Russ for weeks, driven crazy by his hatred for the younger man. But they had been jolted, nonetheless. It had been difficult to imagine the banker, a soft-spoken and kindly man, as a killer. But it had been even more difficult to visualize him facing the music. Even at that first moment they'd realized that the dead man had kinfolk who would try to avenge him.

Stacey had said, "I'll take my medicine." But they'd seen the fear in him and had sensed that he wanted them to help him get out of taking his medicine.

Being his father-in-law, Pat Higgins had said, "No. Tom and I will cover up for you."

And McVey, because they were his friends, had said, "Sure, we'll keep you in the clear, George. Get hold of yourself."

They had left him at the ranch and gone to find Russ's body. On the way, Higgins had said that he would take the blame. But McVey had reasoned that the old man could no more get away with it than Stacey. He, on the other hand, could claim self-defense with a chance of being believed. Now he knew what a fool he'd been. Murder wasn't easily covered up.

McVEY forded the river and turned upstream. He left his horse in a clump of trees and went on toward the town on foot. The Stacey house stood on the east end of Riverbend, and he reached it without encountering anyone who might wonder about his visit there at such a time. Outside, it was no more attractive than its neighbors, but within, McVey knew from other visits, George's money and Clara's pride of possession had made it a fine home. It was Clara who answered his knock and admitted him.

"George had some work at the bank," she told him. "But he won't be long."

She'd always been a gay and rather frivolous person, but she was grave now and he wondered if she had grown wiser since Russ Brandon's death. He couldn't tell. He'd never quite understood Clara, nor wholly trusted her.

He said, "You heard how things turned out today?"

She nodded. "The whole town's talking."

"How's George taking it?"

"He's frightened, Tom. Badly frightened."

"I thought he would be," McVey told her. "That's why I came here. I want to tell him that he's still safe. Nobody's going to tell that Texan anything."

Clara frowned, and the troubled look in her eyes seemed genuine. "Just so George himself doesn't let it out. He's brooding. His conscience is bothering him—not because of Russ, but because he got you in a jam. I'm afraid, awfully afraid, that he'll try to get you out of it. Not that I don't want you safe. . . ." She touched his arm. "But he wouldn't have a chance, Tom. You know that."

"I know that," he said. Then: "Look; how about giving me a cup of coffee while we wait for George? I haven't eaten since early this morning."

"Of course. Come back to the kitchen and I'll fix you something."

He had her draw the blind on the kitchen window before he entered the room, so that there was no danger of anyone seeing him from outside. He seated himself at the table with its red-and-white checked cloth, suddenly as tired as he was hungry. It had been a hard day, even though he'd done not a stroke of work. He built and lit a cigarette, then watched Clara as she put kindling in the cookstove and fixed a pot of coffee.

She was an attractive young woman of twenty-four or five. She had a wealth of honey-blonde hair, a glowing complexion. She was one of those soft, warm women seemingly made to love and to be loved, and once he had thought himself in love with her. He'd courted her. Eventually, he might have married her—had she been willing to accept him. But George Stacey had come along, swept her off her feet, and married her in a hurry.

McVey didn't understand that business between her and Russ Brandon. He'd heard of it from her father. Old Pat Higgins had been worrying about it and, when worried, Higgins, like many men, took to drink. He'd been drunk the night he showed up at McVey's ranch, and the whisky had loosened his tongue. That had been a week before Russ's death.

The story had enraged McVey. As Higgins had told it, Clara had come to stay with her father while George was on a business trip to St. Louis. She'd been at the ranch only two days when Russ came riding by and saw her, and stopped to talk. Clara was a woman who drew men to her as a lodestone drew metal.

Russ had returned the next day and the next. Another day Clara had taken a horse and ridden out across the range, and one of Higgins's cowhands had seen her meet Russ a couple of miles from ranch headquarters. Her father had given her a calling-down for that, but she'd protested that she'd done nothing wrong—that she'd run into Russ not by design but by chance.

She hadn't ridden again, but late one afternoon Higgins came in from mavericking over near the Dragoon Hills and saw, from a distance, a rider leaving his headquarters. He'd been too far off to be sure, but he thought it was Russ Brandon. He'd been in an ugly temper when he reached the buildings, his mind made up to send Clara back to town, but upon entering the house he found her hysterical.

He'd not been able to calm her, but learned, in the brief intervals that she was coherent, that Russ had taken her by force. She'd fought him as best she could, but his strength and brutality were too much for her. Russ had warned her not to tell anyone; he'd threatened to say that she had submitted willingly, if she talked.

Higgins had assured her that they would keep it a secret. He'd been convinced that she wasn't blameless, even though she had fought to keep herself from being violated. Higgins had felt that she had led Russ into believing that she would welcome his advances.

But that was all the more reason not to let her husband know.

The secret might have been kept, had not George Stacey returned from his trip that very day. He'd driven out to the Higgins ranch in a horse and buggy, arriving while Clara was still hysterical, and so he had learned the truth. Stacey's presence had calmed her somewhat, but she was terrified that he might suspect that she had led Russ on by flirting with him. She'd kept insisting that she had done nothing wrong.

STACEY hadn't flown into a rage. To Pat Higgins, the banker's controlled anger had seemed a more frightening thing than explosive rage. He'd pleaded with his son-in-law not to do anything foolhardy. He'd been afraid that if Stacey went after Russ Brandon with a gun it would be Russ who did the killing.

Stacey had waited—one week, two, three. Then one day he'd seen Russ in town. He'd armed himself, obtained a mount at the livery stable, ridden out. He'd waited at the creek ford, then accosted the XO manager. Russ had been his usual cocky self. He'd told Stacey that Clara had flirted with him on several occasions and that she'd given herself to him the day he found her alone at the ranch.

Stacey had known that his wife was by nature a flirt, but whether or not he believed Russ Brandon, McVey didn't know. He did know, however, that George Stacey had shot Russ Brandon dead.

Sitting in Clara's kitchen and watching her, McVey remembered the anger he'd felt when Higgins finished the ugly story. He recalled having said something about his going after Russ, but the old man had argued against that. He'd pointed out that it wasn't McVey's place to even the score, since Clara was not his wife. And he'd added, with much bitterness, "Besides, Russ alone wasn't to blame. I figure Clara led him on. You know how she can work on a man."

After Russ's death, McVey and Pat Higgins had made their quick decision to cover up for George Stacey for more reasons than to protect the banker from the vengeance of Russ's kinfolk. They had not wanted the whole range to know what had happened to Clara. Even if she were not entirely blameless, it was better to keep the secret. They hadn't wanted her to become the object of gossip.

Clara came to set a place at the table for McVey. She gave him a searching look and said, "You're awfully quiet, Tom. Haven't you anything to say to me? After all, you and I—" she smiled at him—"are old friends. Or have you forgotten?"

There was more in her smile than mere friendliness, and her tone hinted at remembered intimacies. He thought, Great Scot, she's starting in on me again! What had happened to her because she'd smiled upon Russ Brandon had taught her nothing, it seemed. He looked at her, marvelling, understanding her less and less.

"I guess I ran out of talk at that crazy trial today," he told her. "Too much was said—too many lies."

As though she'd read his thoughts, Clara said, "You're blaming me for all this trouble." Her lower lip quivered; there was a threat of tears. "Like George. Just like George. You'd think I wanted this, the way you and he treat me. I tried to fight Russ off, I didn't want George to kill him, I'd do anything to keep those Texans from harming you or finding out about George." The tears came. She wiped them away with a corner of her apron. Then; "Tom, don't you turn against me—not you too!"

"All right, Clara, I won't turn against you. And I doubt that George has."

"You don't know. He no longer treats me . . . well, like a wife."

"This thing is on his conscience."

"He blames me," Clara said, "and without reason. I never gave Russ reason to believe that I'm a loose woman. I didn't. You believe that, don't you, Tom?"

He said, "Sure, Clara, I believe it," and at that moment he understood her.

Clara could do no wrong, to her own way of thinking. She was still far from grown up. She was wronged against, but never wrong. She could flirt with a man other than her husband, and the man was to blame if he tried to take advantage of her.

Even now, with the tears wiped away, she was smiling at him again in that too-intimate way and saying, "At least I can always count on you. Can't I, Tom?"

He smiled wryly. "That you can, Clara."

He had just finished the supper she had hastily fixed for him, and was on his second cup of coffee, when George Stacey arrived. Though strictly a big-city man, Stacey had adapted himself completely to the back-country of Riverbend and was perhaps the town's leading and most respected citizen. He came of a family that owned banks in Cheyenne and St. Louis, and the Riverbend

Bank was linked with the other two establishments.

Stacey was a coarsely handsome man in his middle thirties. He was of stocky build and growing a bit thick through the middle. He'd been a jovial sort until this trouble. It had turned him solemn, and tonight he looked down right grim.

He acknowledged McVey's presence with a nod, and replied with an even more curt nod to Clara's asking him if he would like a cup of coffee. He seated himself at the table, and said, "So it's started, has it?"

McVey nodded. "But how did you know?"

"Len Macklin and another XO man came into town as I left the bank," Stacey said. "They had only one horse between them. The other man, Chick Evans, was hurt. Macklin claims they had a fight with you and that you tried your best to kill them."

"Macklin is stretching it. If I'd tried my best, they would be dead men now. They jumped me over in the hills, tried to cripple me so they could hand me over to Matthew Brandon. Did they head for his camp?"

"Yes."

"He'll start a manhunt," McVey said. He finished his coffee, rose, picked up his hat. "They're apt to find my horse and then come hunting me here in town. I'd better move along. I came here to tell you not to worry, George. You're still safe. No matter what happens, I'm not going to give it away that you . . . Well, you know you can depend on me."

Stacey nodded. "I know," he said. Then his face turned hard, his voice ugly. "I want you to know this, Tom. Brandon has to be stopped, and I'm going to stop him. He's not going to cause more trouble. I've made up my mind to that."

McVEY eyed him curiously. "What's on your mind, George?"

Stacey said, "After what happened at Hatchet Creek, I made inquiries about the Brandon clan through the Stacey banks in Cheyenne and St. Louis. I've learned enough about Matthew Brandon to know that there's a way to get him. Two years ago he met up with hard times and came close to going broke. He'd suffered heavy cattle loses.

"To recoup, he shipped cattle to market when beef prices were at rock bottom. That still didn't save him. He was forced to form a corporation and sell stock to the public. His Brandon Cattle Company is largely owned by shareholders other than himself and his sons. His Texas ranch is still not too prosperous, and his newly-founded ranch here in Wyoming has yet to show a profit. So the way to hit back at him is through his company and its stockholders. You follow me, Tom?"

"You're planning a sort of financial bushwhacking?"

"You could call it that."

"That's a dirty sort of game, isn't it, George?"

"Maybe it is, but it's the only way to keep him from making more trouble here," Stacey said. "And he's planning trouble for this whole range." He paused to light a cigar, the hard look still on his face.

Then: "Drought conditions are still serious on his Texas range. He was rounding up cattle for the trail when word of Russ's death reached him. He didn't halt the work. He shaped up two big herds. He stayed with them most of the way up from Texas to make sure they got through safely. That's why it took him so long after Russ's death to show up here. He's going to throw those two herds —five thousand head—onto the Powder River range. They'll arrive in a few days. So you can see that somebody's got to trip him up—for more reasons than one."

McVey was frowning. He said, "Five thousand head . . . there's not enough grass for that many more cattle. The range is already overstocked. Every rancher along the Powder will be up in arms when those Brandon herds are trailed in."

"They'll talk a good fight, and that's about all," Stacey said. "They won't buck Brandon's gunhands. He'll have to be stopped another way. So it's up to me. I may have to play an underhanded game, but I doubt if anybody—except Brandon—will find fault with that."

"I won't," McVey said, "if it gets him off my neck."

"I'll get him off," Stacey said, rising. "But it'll take a little time. Meanwhile, you'd bet-

ter keep out of his way. Where will you be if I need to get in touch with you?"

"At my ranch," McVey said. "No use my going back to the Reservation until this thing is settled. The ranch won't be the safest place, but I'm not letting Brandon scare me out of the country. If he and his men come after me, I'll run. But when they leave, I'll come back. If I have to play hide-and-seek, I'll do it—until Brandon gets mighty sick of the game." He held out his hand. "Wish me luck, George. I'll probably need it."

They shook hands, and McVey, after saying goodnight to Clara, left the house. He'd no sooner reached the street when he heard the racket of a big bunch of riders coming into town. He looked toward midtown and saw a dozen horsemen, shadowy shapes in the darkness, swing into Main Street from South. They traveled at a lope west along Main and across the river bridge, then were lost to his sight.

He didn't need to wonder who they were or where they were headed. The two XO men had told Matthew Brandon of their encounter with him, and how a large part of his crew was out to start a manhunt through the hills.

McVey headed for the clump of trees where he'd left his horse, knowing he must get through to the open range before they could catch him in a trap within the hills.

He heard the manhunters in the distance as he quartered down the last timbered slope. He held the dun to an easy lope for several miles across the undulating range, then, certain that there was no pursuit, slowed to a walk. At midnight he bedded down in a brush-filled hollow, a spot in which he would not be easily discovered if the Brandon crowd extended its search this far north. He slept lightly, but heard no riders during the remainder of the night.

At dawn he was in the saddle again, and soon he reached Hatchet Creek at a point perhaps a quarter of a mile from the ford where Russ Brandon had been shot down. He halted to let his horse drink. Two hours after sunrise he rode up to Pat Higgins's ranch buildings. He found Higgins saddling a horse by the corral. Chris Nolan and Milt Jessup stood beside their own mounts.

AS HE reined in, McVey found himself thinking, here are three frightened men. They were more or less poker faced, and there was nothing visible in their manner to give basis to his thought, but he sensed somehow that they were scared.

He said, "Something happen?"

Higgins nodded. "Chris stopped off at Milt's place down on the Hatchet last night. About two in the morning a bunch of riders came along and riddled the door and windows of Milt's cabin with bullets."

McVey looked at Jessup. "That's all?"

"Isn't that enough, man?"

"It's enough, Milt. I'm just wondering if that's the whole story. Did they just shoot up your place and then clear out, without trying to get at you?"

"They fired a couple dozen shots, all in a few seconds," Jessup said. "By the time Chris and I and my cowhands rolled out of our bunks and were ready to shoot back, they were hightailing it. We didn't even get a good look at them. But it was the Brandon crowd, all right."

McVey nodded. "They wanted to throw a scare into you," he said, "to break your nerve, so you'll get the idea that maybe you should talk to Matthew Brandon. Len Macklin told him about you and Chris and Pat being my three witnesses, so Brandon figures you know who killed Russ. Those Texans were hunting me last night, and they must have decided to pay you a visit after I gave them the slip. Macklin must have told Brandon where you live."

"Well, I won't be at home when they come calling again."

"Where are you headed?"

"We've talked it over and Chris's ranch seems a good place to hide out," Jessup said. "We'll hole up there for awhile. The way Chris's ranch is located, in Bandera Valley, it's not easy to reach. And if the Brandon crowd should find it, we'll have a chance of standing them off with our Winchesters in that rough country. Maybe you'd better come along."

"Later, maybe," McVey said, "if they make it too hot for me. I'll put up at my ranch. It's near enough to Bandera Valley that I can make a run for it."

"Why risk getting caught off guard?" Higgins asked. "Brandon is sure going to keep trying to trap you."

"He won't catch me napping," McVey said. "Got any coffee on the fire, Pat?"

Higgins said that there was a pot of coffee on the stove in the bunkhouse, and McVey headed for there as the three frightened men rode out. He drank two cups of coffee and ate a couple of stale biscuits, then went outside and smoked a cigarette before getting back in the saddle. Higgins and the other two were already out of sight. Neither of the old man's cowhands was around headquarters, but he came upon the two of them a little later.

They had a branding fire going in a little hollow, and Pete Erny lifted a branding iron from it as Slim Wheeler rode in, dragging a bawling calf at the end of his rope. This early-summer branding was contrary to an agreement among the ranchers to brand only at specified times, during roundups in which all the outfits participated. That the agreement was broken by most of the men party to it, McVey was well aware.

The ranchers figured that if they didn't brand their own calves and as many mavericks as they came upon, rustlers would get the jump on them. So the cattle were constantly being harried, and this, along with the overstocking of the range, kept the ranchers from raising the best possible grade of beef.

Pat Higgins was not to be blamed for going along with a situation he could not change, but McVey was thankful he had his steers where they were not molested either by branding crews or rustlers.

Later, toward noon, McVey sighted Pat Higgins and his companions about a mile ahead. He did not try to overtake them, and soon they turned due west toward one of the passes in the rock hills rimming Bandera Valley.

In another hour he topped a rise and saw his ranch headquarters; a small log house, a barn with an attached corral, a couple of sheds. There was nothing imposing about the buildings, but he could look upon them with pride because he had built them himself, with the help of his one ranchhand.

A man and a saddled horse stood by the roofed and stone-buttressed well at the side of the cabin, the man drinking from a dipper and watching McVey come in. From a distance McVey thought it was Al Henry, his hired hand. Then, drawing close, he recognized the man, with a sense of shock, as the rustler Riordan.

JAKE RIORDAN had once ramrodded the ML Ranch for the Cheyenne Cattle Company, but he'd been caught by his employers putting too many of their calves in his own Ladder R iron. His presence here on the range in broad daylight was a surprising thing. There were at least a dozen ranchers eager to put a slug in him, or a rope around his neck.

Since losing his job at ML Ranch, Riordan had organized a band of tough hands and gone in for large-scale rustlings. He was a big man, as tall as McVey and half again as thick through the body. He emptied the dipper and replaced it on its nail on the roof post. Then, perched on the well wall, he began to fashion a cigarette. A grin appeared on his ruddy face as McVey reined in facing him.

"Get the sour look off your face, McVey," he said. "A friend of yours now happens to be a friend of mine. He told me to drop by and see you."

"Now who could be friendly with both you and me, Jake?"

"A real big man," Riordan said, lighting his cigarette. "George Stacey."

McVey stared at him. "Go on," he said. "I don't want to believe it, but I have to. Why'd he send you to see me?"

"We made a deal. You're to be in on it."

"Stacey went a little too far when he did that, Jake."

Riordan remained amiable. "Don't try to rile me up," he said. "Maybe I rustle a few cattle now and then, but a banker pulls trickier stunts. Some time ask Stacey about the mortgages he forecloses and how many widows and kids he leaves without a roof over their heads. Ask him too about the men he's slickered—and about why he wants to get one named Matthew Brandon over a barrel. When you figure it out, McVey, you'll admit that I'm a piker compared to a sharper like Stacey."

McVey dismounted and filled the dipper from the bucket of water Riordan had drawn from the well. "All right," he said. "I could argue the point, but I won't. What's the deal and where do I fit in?"

"Stacey said you'd fix things for me."

"What things?"

"Look, quit playing dumb." Riordan's friendliness was fading. "You know what this is all about. Stacey said you and he saw eye to eye on this Brandon business."

"I talked with him last night. He didn't mention you."

"He wasn't sure I'd show up," Riordan said. "He'd sent word to me a week or more ago, but I didn't get to town until last night. You'd just left his house when I got there. Anyway, he mentioned you to me, and that's what counts. The way he told me, Stacey figures that Matthew Brandon means nothing but trouble for this whole range—along with wanting to nail your hide to the fence. So he wants me to make trouble for the Texan."

McVey drank from the dipper, put it back on the post. Then he said, "Just how are you going to make trouble for Brandon?"

"How do you think?" Riordan said. "By making off with his cattle, once he turns those two herds loose on the range. I'm to have a free hand. Stacey says that you're to see that I get it."

"Keep talking."

"All you've got to do is have a talk with the other ranchers."

"I'm to tell them that you're to have a free hand, eh?"

"That's it."

"They'll never go for that," McVey said. "You've got a bad reputation, Jake. My idea is that the ranchers would rather share the range with Brandon than come to turns with a thief."

Riordan scowled. "You've a rough tongue, McVey. But I'll swallow what you just called me, for now. As for these Powder River ranchers, I know what they're like. They'd come to terms with the Devil himself rather than share the range with a big outfit like Brandon's." He took a final puff on his cigarette, threw it to the ground. He got off the well wall and tapped McVey on the chest. "You can't dispute that, can you, bucko?"

McVey merely shrugged, inclined to believe that the rustler was right.

Riordan went on, "Figure it this way. I'll make a killing on those Brandon cattle. I'll have a stake that will set me up for life. There'll be no need for me to go on risking my neck running off anybody else's cattle. After I've cleaned out Brandon, I'll quit."

McVey said, "You've come to the wrong man," and saw the black look of rage cross Riordan's heavy face. He went on, "Stacey should know me better than to think I'd be a party to a deal with a rustler."

"I'll let Stacey know about this."

"Your privilege."

Riordan stared at him for a long moment, then shrugged, said, "Have it your way," and turned toward his horse. He reached for its trailing reins and made as if to mount, then whirled with his gun in his hand.

McVEY had been watching him closely, and so was braced and ready. He threw a punch at Riordan's face before the rustler could bring the gun to bear, and caught him between the eyes. Staggered, perhaps momentarily blinded, Riordan swung the six-shooter like a club. McVey dodged the blow, closed in, got a two-handed grip on his right forearm. He jerked the rustler off balance, then rapped his hand hard against the well's stone wall.

Riordan yelled with pain, lost his hold on the weapon. But now, with a shouted oath, he drove a knee to McVey's groin. For McVey there was numbing agony. The pain doubled him over, and then, clouted at the base of the skull by the rustler, he was driven to the ground. Dimly he saw Riordan grabbing for the gun.

He had the presence of mind to kick out, all he was capable of doing at the moment, and the toe of his boot struck the revolver and sent it slithering beyond Riordan's reach. The rustler swore and dived after it.

McVey forced himself up and lunged from a crouch, slamming against Riordan's reaching arm and throwing him off balance. He caught up the gun, flung it aside, then came erect and drove a punch to the side of Riordan's head. The rustler reeled backward and fell to his knees against the well.

There was still a knotted-up feeling in McVey's groin. He said roughly, "What was that all about, anyway?"

Rriodan slowly rose. "Nothing. Forget it."

"You pull a gun on me, and I should forget it. Talk sense, man."

"I wasn't aiming to shoot you."

"Now I've heard it all. Try again, Jake."

Riordan had lost his hat in the scuffle, and now looked around for it. He picked it up, slapped it against his thigh to rid it of dust, then reshaped it. "If you're not with me, you're against me," he said. "I just didn't like the idea of riding out with you at my back with a gun. I figured I'd get the drop on you and disarm you."

McVey eyed him intently, decided that it was the truth. Tough as he was, Jake Riordan lived in fear. McVey said, "If I ever have reason to want you dead, I won't get you from behind. I'll brace you head on and take my chances." He nodded toward the rustler's horse, a big blaze-faced black gelding.

Riordan went to his horse, swung to the saddle, then scowled at McVey. "Better think it over, McVey. Better change your mind." Then, wheeling the black about, he rode away.

McVey stared after him with a troubled frown. He knew that a man up against a powerful enemy couldn't be choosy in picking allies, but he felt that George Stacey had gone too far in making an alliance with Jake.

There was a side to the banker he was only now getting to see—a capacity for trickery and double-dealing. And he didn't like it.

AL HENRY rode in late in the afternoon. He was a lean, Indian-dark man in his middle forties. A game leg, a souvenir of the War between the States, had made it difficult for him to hold a steady job until McVey hired him three years ago. A part of his loyalty to McVey was therefore based on gratitude, and it was characteristic of him that he offered, after being told of the Brandon trouble, to go to the Indian Reservation and keep an eye on McVey's steers.

"Rather take my chances with the Indians than with the Brandons," he said. "I knew that bunch back in Texas years ago."

They ate an early supper, and at sundown Henry saddled a fresh mount, tied his blanket-roll behind the cantle, and rode out. Later, as dusk thickened, McVey rode to a clump of trees along a little creek north of his buildings. There he spread his blankets.

He was close enough to keep watch on his headquarters, but not so close that the Texans, if they came in the night, could trap him. He smoked a cigarette, then bedded down. In the middle of the night, he was wakened by a drumming of hoofs.

He got hastily from his blankets, picked up his rifle, and moved to the edge of the timber. It was a clear night, an almost cloudless sky with a sickle moon in the southwest, and he could see the shadowy shapes of a half-dozen horsemen approaching the ranch buildings.

They entered the yard. One shouted, "McVey! You there, McVey!"

When they got no response from the cabin, two of the group dismounted and entered it. They were inside only long enough to make sure the cabin was empty. There was some discussion then they rode out toward XO.

Not until the beat of hoofs faded in the distance did McVey relax and again breathe normally. He could not rid himself of uneasiness, however. He knew they would come back—if not tonight, then another night.

At noon the next day McVey, back at his headquarters, saw a single rider top a rise far to the northeast. He mounted his dun and rode to a nearby hump of ground that gave him a view of a wide portion of the surrounding range. He made sure that the rider was really alone, that no others from XO Ranch were coming. He wondered if the rider might be Matthew Brandon coming in an attempt to talk things out on a more or less friendly basis.

The rider disappeared and re-appeared a number of times across the undulating prairie, dropping into hollows and topping grassy swells, but finally was near enough to remain in full view. The horse was a paint. That was something of a surprise, since few men—other than Indians—fancied piebald mounts. A minute or two later, McVey was even more surprised. The rider was not a man, white or red, but a woman—Linda Brandon.

*(To be continued in the next issue)*

# STRANGER,

***CATHY HAD frightened eyes and warm, soft lips. It was up to Marshal Jeb Peters to learn whether she had a cheating heart***

IN THE shade of the wooden awning, Town Marshal Jeb Peters lolled against the front of the Mercantile and watched the stage lumber up to the express office. The door to the coach opened. Jeb tossed away his cigarette and straightened up, his gray eyes sweeping the passengers as they alighted.

Nobody much ever stopped over in Bonnet, but Jeb figured he ought to know about whoever did. A couple of times some two-bit gamblers had decided to linger and try their luck at the tables in the Red Diamond. They didn't linger long. Jeb Peters wanted a clean peaceful town, and professional card sharks were as unwelcome as a desperado would be.

A girl wearing a quiet brown frock stepped out of the Concord first, holding her full skirt up enough to display her trim ankles as she descended. She walked over to the door of the express office, followed by a tall man with a beaver hat and a black coat.

Edging closer, Jeb heard the man asking a bystander where he could find Sal Kanter, the owner of the Red Diamond. As the saloon man was pointed out to him, the man turned to face Jeb, and for a moment their eyes locked.

Jeb was close enough so he could see the shadow that passed behind the flat blue of the man's eyes when he saw the badge pinned to Jeb's chest. His thin lips curled as he looked away, beyond Jeb, down the plank walk in the direction of the Red Diamond.

Jeb advanced toward him. Hooking his thumbs in the gun belt slung loosely about his waist, he said easily, "Welcome, stranger. Maybe I can be of help to you."

He watched closely the expression on the man's lean face. Except for a slight dropping of the eyelid, it remained imperturbable. A man's face isn't a blank mask unless he had something to hide, Jeb thought. Then the stranger reached up to his beaver hat.

"Pleased to meet you," he said in a raw scratching voice. "But I can make out without the help of the marshal."

Jeb shrugged. The stranger's face seemed oddly familiar to him. He tried to search back into his memory of the stack of dodgers on his desk, hoping he could determine the identity of this man. There

# BE WARY

*By WILL COTTON*

*In the faint light Cathy's face had a soft unreal loveliness*

was something about the pointed jaw and the narrow, flat nose. . . .

"Maybe so," Jeb answered in a low voice, "but I wouldn't be too sure, stranger. This is a peaceable town and I aim to keep it that way."

"A worthy ambition," the man answered with a trace of sarcasm.

Just then hurried footsteps pounded on the board walk, and Sal Kanter came up. His pudgy face was flushed and sweating. He pushed beyond Jeb toward the stranger.

Coming to an abrupt halt, Sal said, "Sorry I was late, Rawlings. Got myself tied up. But this isn't a big town; isn't likely you'd get lost." The saloon owner laughed nervously.

"I'm doing fine," Rawlings said, casting a mocking glance at Jeb. "Been making the acquaintance of your marshal."

The saloon owner looked at Jeb, his lips pursed and wrinkles forming in his fleshy forehead.

"Howdy, Jeb," he said as if embarrassed. "So you've already met Mart Rawlings?"

"That I have," Jeb answered, and moved away.

THE stage driver was cracking his whip and the hoofs of the stage team began to paw in the dust. The girl in the brown dress was just coming out from the express office as Jeb reached it. She stopped, looked at the bags stacked against the side of the building, then stared after the departing stage. The dust began to settle and the creaking and rumbling grew faint. A tremor went over her, and Jeb could see that she was afraid to be standing there alone.

She was in her late teens, he thought, and he liked the way her brown hair spilled out from under her bonnet, and the clear wide blueness of her eyes. He saw, too, that the fullness of her simple dress could not conceal entirely the roundness of her breasts or the slim grace of her figure.

He felt a curious sympathy go out to her, knowing she was troubled. He was conscious that something about her had stirred a part of him he had long since tried to suppress —since Bonny Banks had told him she loved him and then had gone off and married Sam Wetherall.

Jeb had never been able to wipe out entirely the hurt Bonny had caused, and he had never again trusted his emotions. Now, seeing this girl's effect on him, Jeb tried to shove back all feeling.

He took off his Stetson and said,

"You're looking puzzled, ma'am. I'd be happy to help."

Her eyes came back from the retreating stage and she smiled faintly at him. A little of the trouble seemed to drop away from her as she answered.

"I came to visit my uncle, Mr. Sal Kanter. They tell me in the express office that he runs a saloon, the Red Diamond. If I could get my bags there—"

Down the board walk Jeb could see the back of Sal and the stranger, Mart Rawlings, turning into the batwing doors of the saloon.

"Was your uncle expecting you, ma'am?" Jeb asked.

"I wrote him I was coming. But of course I couldn't be sure just what day. There were so many things to attend to after Pa died."

Her voice faltered a little and there was a far-away look on her face, as if she were remembering things she would rather forget.

"Your uncle was just here," Jeb told her, "but he was meeting someone else. You were inside, so he missed you. Well, we'll get your bags down to his place."

He called over to Tom Patch, who was sitting on an empty box outside the mercantile smoothing a chip of wood with his knife. The two of them gathered up the girl's bags.

As they walked down the sidewalk, Jeb remarked, "You brought plenty of luggage, ma'am. I reckon you figure on staying a while."

He saw her bite her lips, and the trouble filtered into her expression again. "Sal Kanter's the only kin I have left," she replied softly.

They continued in silence. Jeb thought about the stranger with the beaver hat, Mart Rawlings, who had come to find Kanter, too. The saloon owner had kept out of trouble

with the law, but Jeb didn't like the looks of Rawlings, and he wondered what these two had in common.

And Jeb was disturbed, too, at the idea of the girl being mixed up with Kanter right now. If Mart Rawlings was the sort of hombre Jeb suspected, there might be things breaking at the Red Diamond that a young girl shouldn't be involved in. But, Jeb realized ruefully, there wasn't much he could do about it, the way things stood.

OUTSIDE the saloon, Jeb set down the bags he was carrying. Wiping his damp forehead, he pushed inside the batwings, the girl following him into the dim, musty-smelling saloon. He saw Kanter, short and squat, huddled with Rawlings at the far end of the bar. As Kanter turned to see who had come in, the girl at Jeb's side gave a convulsive shudder.

"I brought you a visitor," Jeb said to the saloon owner. "You seem to have a corner on all the folks that got off the stage today."

The girl moved tentatively closer to Sal Kanter. "Are you Uncle Sal?" she asked in a tight little voice.

Kanter was rubbing the palms of his hands together.

"Cathy," he said. "You're little Cathy."

"Not so little any more."

Sal's small eyes were going over her—greedily, Jeb thought—taking in her figure as she stood there nervously.

Then she said,

"That man over there, Uncle Sal—he was on the stage. What's he doing here?"

"Him?" Sal asked, jerking his thumb at Rawlings. "Why, he's a friend of mine. Just passing through. Say, Cathy, what's the matter with you?"

Jeb, too, had seen the way the color drained out of Cathy's cheeks at her uncle's words. He wanted to hang around, be close to this girl, because he knew she was afraid. With an effort he brushed his feelings aside, telling himself he was being foolish.

The girl was strange here, coming to a new home with an uncle she had scarcely seen. That would be enough to create the strain she was under. Besides, she wasn't used to saloons. There was plenty of reason for the trouble that showed in her pale features. As she got used to things her fears would pass.

"Well, ma'am, reckon I'll run along," Jeb said. "I hope you'll like it here at Bonnet."

He reached out a hand, large and brown and powerful, and for a brief moment her small hand rested in his. The feel of her made his skin tingle. He thought, take it easy, boy. You've been hurt once by a woman, and that's enough.

"You've been very kind," she was saying softly, the faint smile again playing across her lips. "I can't thank you enough."

He saw she was trying to master her uneasiness. Reassuringly he returned her smile.

"I'll be around," he answered, "any time you want."

Then he swung around on his heel and went out.

Back at his office, Jeb thumbed through the pile of dodgers, looking for one of Mart Rawlings. But he must have made a mistake, because he didn't find one. Yet Rawlings's features remained like some nagging puzzle, the answer to which lay buried in the hidden places of his mind.

At night the Red Diamond took on a raucous blaring life it never knew by day. Punchers, ranchers, small merchants, miners from back in the hills, all rubbed shoulders as they pressed against the bar or crowded the few tables.

Jeb Peters generally left the Red Diamond pretty much to itself. He knew the saloon was as necessary to Bonnet as the mercantile or the bank. It was a safety valve for the harsh pressures of the frontier, and if men drank hard it was only because they lived harder.

When a brawl broke out inside, which was not infrequent, Sal Kanter and his barmen handled it. But sometimes fighting would spill out into the street, and then Jeb would move in on it. The streets had to be peaceful, so a woman might walk along them without fear. Usually it was only a matter of minutes before the offenders were sobering up in the cell behind Jeb's office. Only when guns flared did Jeb invade the Red Diamond to restore order to a situation.

BUT the thought of Cathy and the beaver-hatted Rawlings drew Jeb to the Red Diamond that evening. As he elbowed his way through the crowd around the bar, his eye caught sight of Rawlings, sitting at one of the tables with Sam Wetherall and two other ranchers. The table was cluttered with chips. Jeb saw Rawlings open and close a fan of cards in his hand. Then he looked away, feeling as always the stab of pain that came when he saw Sam Wetherall, the man who had succeeded where he had failed.

It was understandable why Bonny had chosen the rancher. He could give her the material things that Jeb perhaps never would be able to supply. And he had been wrong, Jeb remembered ruefully, in thinking that if Bonny loved him the way he did her those material things weren't so important. Maybe Bonny had never really loved him.

He reached the bar, feeling the crush of bodies close around him. Kanter, a dirty apron tucked around his middle, was helping his barman pour drinks. The sweat glistened on his fat face and he watched his customers with greedy eyes, pushing a bottle forward whenever a glass was set down empty. Jeb beckoned to him, saw the saloon owner's jaw go a little slack as he saw him.

"What will you drink?" Kanter asked as he bustled up. "You're my guest, Jeb. Best marshal Bonnet ever had."

"I'm not thirsty," Jeb told him. "But I'm wondering, Sal. How much is your chum there taking Wetherall for?"

He watched the beads of sweat collecting on Kanter's forehead. "Don't reckon I rightly understood you, Jeb," Sal said finally, trying to look puzzled.

"I don't want to have card sharks around this town, Kanter. Cold decking is out."

"You got Rawlings wrong," Sal said, licking his lips. He wiped some of the sweat off his fat face. "Sure, Mart likes a sociable game. Who doesn't? There's nothing wrong with that."

"Not with a *sociable* game."

"So I fixed it up. You can see for yourself that Rawlings is on the level. The last I knew, he was in the hole plenty. You can ask Wetherall if it isn't all square."

"You know as well as I do that they always start by going in the hole plenty and dealing honest hands. It attracts the suckers."

"Rawlings is no gambler."

Jeb shrugged. He decided he wasn't going to get anywhere by talk. "And how's your niece?" he found himself asking.

Relief flooded into Kanter's face. The saloon owner picked up the bottle he had set down on the bar, and held it out toward Jeb.

"Better have one," he said with a twisted smile. "This is good stuff, Jeb, my best. Cathy's fine. She was kind of floored at first to find her uncle running a drinking place, but she'll get over that. If you want to see her, she's upstairs. She goes for you, Jeb." He chuckled softly.

"Another time," Jeb said.

He pushed away from the bar. Near the door he paused and watched Marty Rawlings at the table, saw his long fingers ruffling a pack of cards and then flicking them out across the table. There was nothing crooked in that deal. Maybe he had been making a mistake.

Jeb went out into the fresh cool air of evening. He had gone only a few paces when he heard the rapid click of lightly running feet behind him. He swung around to find a girl coming toward him along the plank walk. As she passed through a beam of light seeping out from a window, Jeb recognized Cathy.

"Hello, Jeb," she whispered as she came up to him. "I had to see you. You said any time. Do you mind?"

Wondering, he shook his head.

"I was upstairs, in Uncle Sal's quarters, looking down into the saloon, and I saw you go out. He has a window up there so he can see what's going on in his place all the time."

"I didn't know that."

SHE paused a moment, and Jeb could feel her eyes searching his face. He recognized the desire that was building up inside him for the girl who stood so close to him. He could make out the rise and fall of her breasts as she breathed.

Then he realized that Cathy was hesitating

because she was embarrassed, and he didn't like her to feel that way with him. He reached out and took her arm gently.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Oh, Jeb," she cried suddenly, and he felt a tremor pass over her. Unconsciously his arm went around her, pulling her close to him. She looked up, and in the faint light from the window the planes of her face melted into a soft unreal loveliness.

"Take me away, Jeb," she pleaded. "I can't stay there, and I have nowhere else to go. But I must get away."

Jeb leaned over and found his lips touch-

*"Good gosh! What did we throw over the cliff?"*

ing hers. They were warm lips, firm and a little salty-tasting. He knew, that moment, that he was lost; that he had exposed himself again to the pain which comes from feeling too strongly about a woman. He hated himself for his weakness, yet he was powerless to resist.

She was clinging to him, her hands around his neck and her lips hot and fervent against his. He did not know how long they stood there, locked together like that, because all time ceased to exist.

Then he became conscious of the sound of hoofs pounding against the dusty street. Abruptly Cathy pulled away from him, leaving his whole being empty with unsatisfied need.

"Oh," she said, drawing in her breath, "I didn't mean—Jeb, it's just that you're the only one I can turn to."

"We'll work it out," he said, his voice seeming gritty in his throat. "You won't have to stay at the saloon."

The rider pulled up to the hitching rack just beyond them. All feeling dropped away from Jeb as he realized that the slender dismounting figure was Bonny Wetherall. She tied her mount and started walking down the street. Jeb flashed a glance at Cathy, but she was deep in her own thoughts. It seemed to Jeb that sanity had suddenly returned to him.

Bonny moved along the street, ignoring them as if she wanted to pass undisturbed. Her figure grew shadowy, blended into the night, while Jeb watched her. She was heading toward the Red Diamond. Perhaps she was looking for her husband, Jeb thought.

Cathy's voice pulled him back to the moment. "What can we do?" she asked.

"Better tell me first what's wrong at Sal's," Jeb said. Her voice was low and unemotional now, and he figured he had gotten hold of himself again. But deep inside he was afraid, knowing that if he had forgotten himself once it could happen again.

She told him, as they walked slowly down the deserted sidewalk. She was sure Sal didn't want her around. He pretended otherwise, but she could tell. And anyway, with Mart Rawlings there it was impossible for her to stay. He had bothered her on the coach. She knew he would find a way to bother her again. He wasn't the kind who would stop short of getting what he wanted.

"What do you know about this Mart?" Jeb asked. "I don't like his looks. In my business you get so you can usually tell when a man is no good. I'd sure like to know what's up between him and your uncle."

"I don't know. But Uncle Sal is afraid of him too. They had a long talk soon after I got there, and when it was over Uncle Sal's face was as white as chalk. He tried to pour himself a drink and he spilled most of it. Is my uncle a bad man, Jeb?"

"No, Cathy, I don't reckon Sal's bad. Maybe weak, but not really bad."

"Then Rawlings is driving him to be bad," she said decidedly.

"Why do you say that?"

Her only answer was vague and womanlike. "I don't know any reason, Jeb, but I'm sure. You have to see that Uncle Sal doesn't go bad on account of that man."

A sense of frustration whipped through Jeb. He didn't like things he couldn't figure out, and there was too much he didn't understand about Mart Rawlings. Unless you knew what was up, it wasn't easy to know what to do next.

But he said tightly, "Don't fret yourself, Cathy. I'll see that Sal doesn't get himself in trouble."

JEB didn't go to bed. He sat in his office, heels resting on the desk, waiting for something to happen. He'd been able to find a bed for Cathy at Mrs. Ridgeway's, and he'd sent a message to Sal so that he wouldn't wonder what had happened to his niece. In the morning Jeb would see Sal and talk it over.

Meanwhile he wondered how the game with Wetherall and Mart Rawlings was progressing. By this time maybe Rawlings had pulled a few fast ones. But Wetherall was no novice at the gambling table, and any attempt to cheat him would bring trouble. Maybe a good idea if it did happen, Jeb thought. Then he'd have the excuse he needed to run Rawlings out of town.

Odd that Rawlings's face was so familiar. Jeb tried to pull out from the back of his mind what it was. He was fairly sure he hadn't seen the man before. He tried to narrow it down as to whether it was the eyes, the nose, or the overall cast of the features, but he wasn't able to pin down just what it was that suggested familiarity.

At last Jeb gave up. His head bent forward and his chin rested against his chest. Lids dropped over his eyes and the heaviness that is a prelude to sleep began to seep into his body. He was half dreaming, seeing Cathy's face as she waited for him to kiss her, and he began mentally to fashion a future in which Cathy would share.

The vision broke, and he remembered Bonny as she told him it was all over between them. Then he realized someone was at the office door. Something that had been forming at the back of his brain shattered. His head snapped up as he tried to recapture what he had lost, knowing it was important.

As the door was torn open he heard a voice shout, "You'd better come quick, Jeb. There's trouble down at the Red Diamond. Wetherall's been shot." It was a white-faced Tom Patch calling from the doorway.

Jeb's feet came off the desk and he sprang up. "Who did it?" he demanded, his hand automatically going toward his hip, feeling for his Colt, assuring himself he was ready.

"That gambling man who came in on the stage," Tom said.

As Jeb went outside, he could hear the commotion down the street. A coolness settled in the pit of his stomach as he swung into the saddle of his long-legged black gelding and kicked the animal forward. It was only a short distance to the Red Diamond, but he wanted his horse handy.

Wetherall was on the floor, his weathered face twisted with pain and crimson bubbling out from the hole in his chest. Sal was standing in the circle of onlookers surrounding the wounded man, his fat face looking strangely ashen. Someone was trying to staunch the wound, but at a glance Jeb could see that the rancher wouldn't last long. He moved up beside Sal Kanter, pulled him out of the crowd, and led him over to the deserted bar. He grabbed a fistful of Kanter's shirt and drew the round face up close to his own.

"Spill it," he said in a low tone.

"I was upstairs when the shot came, Jeb. When I came down it was all over."

Without raising his voice Jeb said, "You're lying, Sal. You have a window up there. You'd look when you heard the shot. What happened to Rawlings?"

Kanter's skin glistened like damp putty.

"Honest, Jeb, I don't know. He took off somewhere."

Jeb slammed Kanter hard against the mahogany of the bar. The fat man moaned.

"You expected something like this," Jeb accused. "I haven't got time to wait until you're ready to talk."

"You got me wrong, Jeb. I knew Mart back in Kansas City, years ago. He told me he was coming here and asked if I could put him up for a couple of days. That's all."

"Mart's a killer, Sal. You'd better talk."

"He wasn't a killer, not the way you think. Wetherall said he was cheating, so Mart got up from the table and started away. Wetherall was drawing, but before he could fire, Mart turned around. He had his gun out and he let Wetherall have it."

Jeb sucked in a hard breath. In a dead flat tone he said, "So you were watching from your window. What else are you holding back?"

"Nothing, Jeb, honest."

SAL'S body began to heave, then, and Jeb released him as the man was suddenly sick. He was scared plumb through, Jeb thought, too scared even to talk. Later, maybe, he could force more information out of the saloon owner.

He noticed that the crowd around the prone body of Wetherall was falling back. Jeb, leaving a shaking Sal, strode over. Even without looking he could tell, from the hush among the onlookers, that Sam Wetherall was dead. He thought abruptly that this would mean Bonny was free. Then he remembered seeing her in town earlier, and he wondered if that fact made sense. Then, like cogs slipping into place, stray bits from his brain meshed, and he knew suddenly why Mart Rawlings's face had seemed familiar.

He checked his pace, feeling a numbing coldness shoot up his spine. He did not want to believe that what he had recognized in Mart's features was a resemblance to Bonny Banks. And Bonny was the wife of the man Mart Rawlings had killed.

The men had grouped around him now, and he let his gaze shuttle across the line of serious faces. "Anyone see the killer go?"

A man stepped forward. "I fanned after him, but I lost him on the edge of town. He must have cut off the road."

"He won't get far before daylight," Jeb said. "I'm swearing in a posse."

There was a murmur of assent. Jeb was giving instructions when Mrs. Ridgeway's young son Pete came in. He ran up to Jeb, and the dazed look in his eye filled Jeb with a sudden apprehension.

"Ma says to tell you the girl you brought over is gone," Pete announced. "A man came and got her. Ma heard them talk, but before she could get a lamp going they were off."

A wave of sickening dread washed over Jeb. He thought, so it's happened again. A woman he had fallen for had been playing with him. There could be no other way to interpret Cathy's departure. Unless. . . .

"Was there a struggle?" he asked the boy, who was staring at the covered form on the floor.

"There wasn't a struggle. She went peacefully."

Jeb sent the posse out, fighting down the hurt he felt. The men disappeared through the batwings, grim and determined. Jeb turned to the bar. The saloon owner was no longer there. Jeb mounted the stairs slowly, his boots beating a hollow tattoo against the worn treads. Reaching for his holster, he slid out his Colt and thumbed back the hammer. The time had come for Sal Kanter to talk plenty.

As Jeb opened the door to the saloon owner's living quarters, he caught the flicker of a moving figure, and a door slammed shut. He edged forward in the darkness and found the closed door by the faint light that seeped out from behind it. He stood to one side and tore it open. Then, finger tense against trigger, Jeb went inside.

Sal was standing beside a battered rolltop desk. His eyes, buried deep in folds of flesh, darted over Jeb with twitching nervousness. There was a .44 on the desk, beside a corked bottle of some thick dark liquid. Sal made no attempt to reach for his weapon.

"This time I want the whole story," Jeb said, "including why your niece went off with Mart."

"I don't know anything, honest." Sal's voice was a whine.

The gun in Jeb's hand kicked, the room filled with smoke, and the explosion rattled the wooden rafters.

"That's to let you know I'm not just talking," Jeb said laconically.

"It isn't my fault," Sal said, rubbing his pudgy hands together. "I had to take Mart in. He knew why I had to leave Kansas City and he said if I didn't play ball with him he'd see I got sent back for that knifing. But I didn't knife anybody, honest."

"A guy with so little guts as you have wouldn't knife anyone," Jeb remarked.

NOW that he had started talking, Sal seemed to want to go on.

"Guess you don't know oil was found on Wetherall's place, Jeb. He wouldn't do anything about it. Said he was a rancher, not an oil man. Refused to allow any more drilling. See that bottle there on the desk? That's a sample."

Jeb nodded.

"Well, Bonny decided if there were oil that meant she could be rich. She got in touch with Mart and they decided to work it."

"I can figure that," Jeb said. "As Wetherall's widow the ranch would come to Bonny. She could drill then as much as she liked. Bonny hankered for things that money could buy."

"Yeah, Jeb, that was it. Mart is Bonny's brother. When she came here from Kansas City she took a new name, figuring it would keep folks from finding out about what she did for a living back where she came from."

"She knew about you, too, then," Jeb went on. "I don't suppose they even had to cut you in on their scheme—just threaten to send you back to the law."

"Honest—"

Jeb's mouth was dry. He said, "Forget it. Now about that niece of yours, Cathy."

"Oh, she doesn't fit in this thing anywhere."

"But she went off with Mart Rawlings."

"He must have forced her. She was afraid of him."

Jeb holstered his gun. A new assurance began to pervade him, and he wondered why he had ever let himself doubt the girl with the warm lips. But immediately icy fingers clutched at him as he began to realize the danger she was in.

"You got a week to sell this saloon and clear town," Jeb said to Sal Kanter.

"Sure, Jeb. I'll get out out faster'n that if you want."

Jeb was already charging from the room. Outside, he tore free the reins of his long-legged gelding and kicked him forward into the night.

Dawn flushed the eastern sky as Jeb rode up to the Wetherall ranch. A puncher, detaching himself from the shadow of a shed, started toward Jeb as he was reining in. The puncher held a gun in a steady hand.

"Jeb Peters, marshal," Jeb said as he swung out of the saddle.

"Your posse passed by here."

"I'm looking for Mrs. Wetherall."

"She's asleep. She won't want to be bothered."

Jeb moved in closer to the puncher. "You can put that gun away," he said harshly. "And tell Mrs. Wetherall I want to see her. Or if you'd rather, tell her guest."

He watched the puncher's face. Jeb couldn't be sure, of course, that Mart Rawlings would come here to hide out. But it made sense. His sister would protect him and where was a less likely hideout for a killer than on his victim's property?

In the faint light from the reddening sky, Jeb thought he could detect a slight jerking of the corners of the puncher's mouth. Then the puncher was staring at him.

"Don't rightly follow you," the man said, "but I'll tell Bonny you're here."

Jeb followed the man into the ranch house. He waited in the tidy parlor while the man went for Bonny. The light was growing stronger, filling the room with a soft unreal glow. After a little Bonny came in, slim, self-assured, her gold hair falling carelessly about her shoulders. Seeing her no longer brought Jeb the sharp pain it once had, but he knew it wasn't going to be easy. When you had loved someone, even if the love has died, there is always the memory and the thoughts of what might have been.

TONELESSLY he said, "It's over, Bonny. Your play for wealth is over. I'm arresting you as an accomplice in the death of your husband."

She began to laugh. It was a hard, tense

laugh, but the unexpectedness of it threw Jeb off for a moment. His fists clamped into tight balls at his sides.

"It will go better with you if you tell me where Mart is."

"I don't think you'll bother me or Mart," she said then, her voice low with cool assurance. "Not while we have the girl. Cathy thinks a lot of you, because she came with Mart right away when he told her you were wounded and asking for her." Then, tilting her head a little to one side, Bonny asked, "You wouldn't want anything to happen to her, would you, Jeb?"

"Nothing will happen to Cathy."

Bonny laughed again.

"You don't believe me, Jeb. Arrest me and see."

White-hot anger flared inside him. He advanced a step, then saw her hand go to her bosom and come out with a small revolver. At the same instant a board creaked behind him. Jeb whirled around. Mart stood a short way inside the door, a naked sixgun at hip level.

"Matter of fact, sis," Mart said hoarsely, "I reckon what happens to Cathy won't make much difference to him any more."

Steel fingers pressed Jeb's throat, squeezing the wind out of him. He was pinned there, between the two guns, still alive only because he was in line with Bonny and Mart, so that if either fired it would endanger the other. As if reading his thought, Mart began edging sideways along the wall.

Curiously, it was not of himself Jeb thought, but of Cathy with her warm lips. He bent forward slightly, arm darting down along his hip, and as he straightened he fired at Mart. An answering explosion tore at his eardrums, and he triggered again as Mart's second slug lanced at him, tore flesh in his shoulder, and sent him reeling back.

Behind him Jeb heard Bonny scream. He bit hard against his lip, tasting blood, as he struggled to keep from going down from the force of the bullet that had slammed against his collarbone. Then the cloud of smoke began to part and he saw that Mart had been hit, too. There was a fleck of foam on his lips, and his eyes were rolling in their sockets as the killer grabbed at his chest. Then, of a sudden, Mart seemed to collapse.

Jeb stood there, rocking a little, while the ragged pain in his shoulder spread out. Behind him Bonny was moaning softly. He turned around slowly, caught the look of anguish in her eyes. The room was so quiet he could hear the splatter of blood dropping on the floor. His mind was hazy, but Jeb realized that Mart's first shot must have hit Bonny. In a way he was relieved, because he had loved her once and he didn't want to have to take her in. Then his eyes began to film and he felt himself pitch forward.

Later, Cathy came to his office. Jeb brought his feet off the desk and jumped up, pulling off his Stetson. The sudden movement wrenched his wounded shoulder, but he smiled anyway and moved toward her.

"I'm saying goodbye," she announced slowly. "Now that Uncle Sal is leaving, I don't guess there's any place for me in Bonnet. I appreciate your sparing Uncle Sal all you could."

Jeb felt suddenly empty inside. Awkwardly he said, "Bonnet isn't such a bad town. I was hoping you'd settle here."

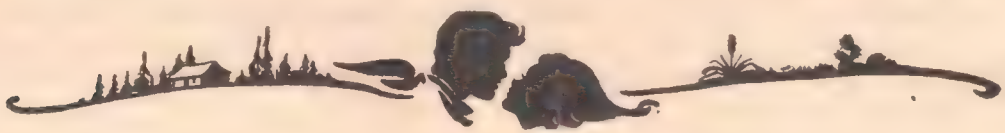
Her lips parted, and Jeb could tell that the thought of leaving brought her sadness, too. She wasn't like Bonny; she wouldn't leave a scar in his heart if he gave in to the feeling that was growing bigger and bigger inside him.

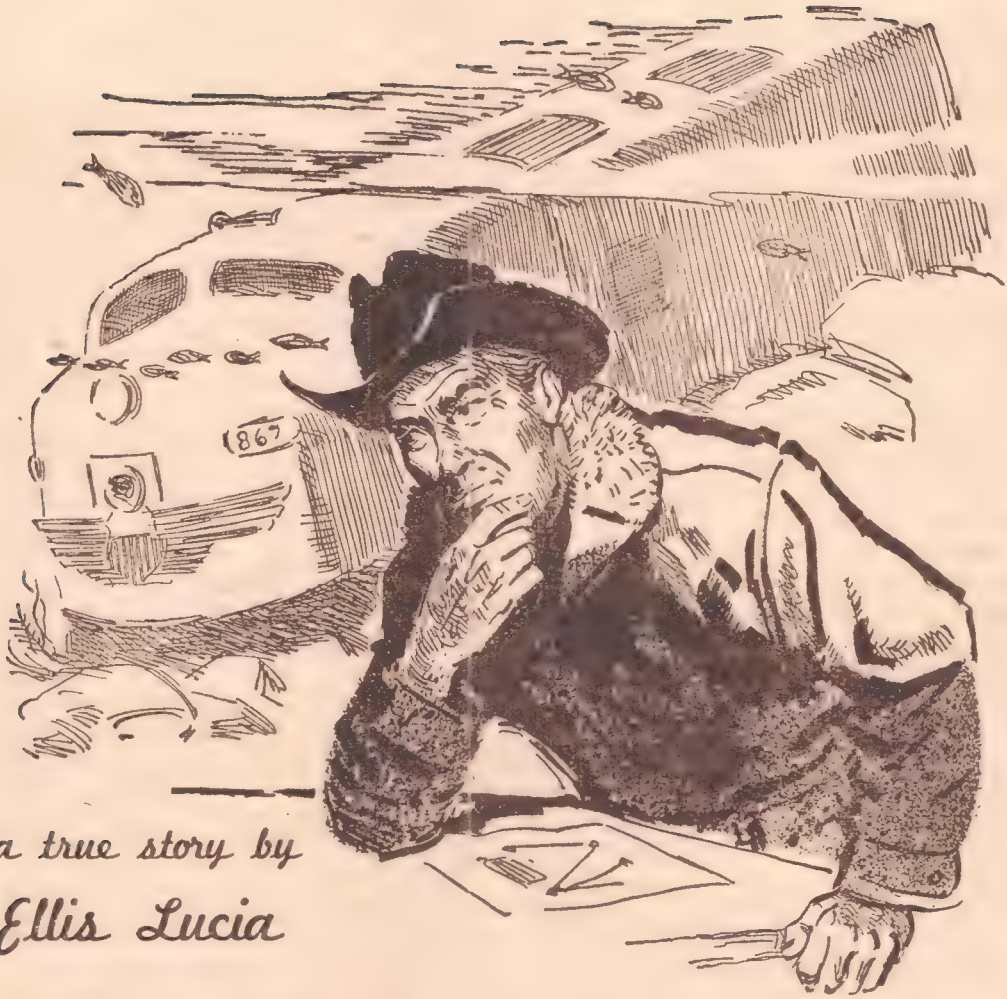
"But there isn't any reason for me to stay on," she said, hesitantly.

His arms went around her, then, drawing her close to him.

"There is a reason," he told her. "A mighty important one."

She knew what he meant. Jeb figured it wasn't necessary to say any more. Instead, he kissed her.






*a true story by*

*Ellis Lucia*

# The Biggest Lariat of Them All

CENTRAL OREGON cowpokes will long remember how Fred Devine lassoed that locomotive. It was the gol-derndest piece of rope-tossing the West ever saw.

Fred Devine didn't use any ordinary piece of rope. His lariat was of steel cable as thick as your wrist, and the noose was bigger than you could imagine. It had to be. Devine's

target was an elusive 120-ton diesel sunk in the raging waters of an angry river.

The story really begins in the fading minutes of January 31, 1954. In this blackest hour of night, a 57-car freight rattled north through the deep Deschutes River canyon of Central Oregon. A savage rain flung itself at the locomotive hull. The engineer and fireman had to strain their eyes to see ahead.

Suddenly the canyon was filled with a deafening roar. The world spun on end. Wood splintered fiercely, as great loaded boxcars flew off the rails and were tossed against the jagged canyon walls. Steel screamed and threw showers of colored sparks into the blackness. Then, as quickly as it had come, the din died away. The train settled like a giant dying rattlesnake.

From the rear of the train shouts went up. The surviving trainmen began a grim inspection of the wreckage. No one was jured, but Engineer Ernie Barton and Fireman Earl Sutton were missing. So was the head unit of the giant locomotive.

A fresh rock slide had caused the tragedy. Rounding a sharp curve, the engine had plowed into the slide. The head unit had broken loose and plunged down a 25-foot embankment into the river. So had a loaded refrigerator car. Its yellow tip stuck out from the river's wild surface some 50 yards downstream from where it had left the track. That was all that was visible of the two cars which had gone into the river.

Railroad clean-up crews with their huge derrick cranes arrived to start mopping up. Of prime concern was the fate of the railroad men. There were no indications that they had jumped clear. If they had ridden the locomotive to its watery grave, their bodies must be recovered at all cost. Also, the Spokane, Portland & Seattle railroad wanted to salvage the diesel, worth $200,000.

The Deschutes was definitely no place to go wading. At the point where the engine took its fateful plunge, the river charges hell-bent through a narrow gorge, creating a massive wall of water. Diving was impossible. The railroad crews were up against it. The diesel played hide-and-seek with their probes and sounding devices. Navy and Coast Guard engineers had no answer.

Then someone asked, "Why not get Fred Devine?"

DEVINE is a legend in the Pacific Northwest. For 40 years this 200-pound brawny Westerner has ranged along the coast salvaging ships, laying cables, building dams, performing impossible feats on a scale ranked with Paul Bunyan. But even this expert was stumped by the problem. How do you salvage a locomotive when you can't get to it, and don't even know where it is? Where do you start?

The railroaders urged Fred do what he could. Days dragged on as Devine and his men poked beneath the river's surface from a special surf boat, anchored securely to each bank by strong cables. It was risky business. If a man lost his footing or the boat upset, he would be swept downstream in an instant. Chance for survival in that water was slim indeed.

A week went by. Suddenly a shout went up. A man riding a magnetic boom thought he had something. When he brought his probe to the surface, grease and green-and-yellow paint clung to the threads of the pipe. They had found Old 867 at last! It was 90 feet from the track, lying in 15 feet of water at right angles to the shoreline.

Diving was out of the question, Devine knew. He had to figure another way. He glanced up at the crowd of spectators on the bluff. Among them were cattle ranchers, and Indians from the nearby Warm Springs reservation. Suddenly an idea struck him.

"We'll lasso that baby with a cable lariat," Fred announced confidently.

On paper the plan looked simple enough. In practice, Devine's dizzy scheme involved some 4000 feet of 2-inch steel cable, plus tractors, bulldozers, winches, tackle blocks, cranes and half a hundred men—all hooked together in one gigantic block and tackle system. What Fred hoped to do was slip a noose around the engine's nose, then drag her to shallow water on the east bank. A coffer dam could be dozed there, deflecting the current enough to allow a diver to explore the cab for the missing men.

Twenty-man crews on each side of the river

made ready for this strange around-up. Devine ordered a telephone system strung from bank to bank so he could co-ordinate the work. On the east shore three heavy anchor cables were strung. The noose itself was rigged from two 800-foot cables attached to huge windlasses.

On the opposite bank a 50-ton bridge crane would draw the lariat across the river before each "toss." A short distance downstream another cable was strung with grappling hooks. These would be lowered into the river, to keep the bodies from going downstream if they should work free when the engine was hooked.

Three hefty 350-pound tackle blocks were included in the system. Each block doubled the pulling power. Two Caterpillar tractors would exert 20 tons of pulling power at the drawbar. Devine would attempt to drag 100 tons of dead weight, plus a calculated 70 tons caused by the river's swift flow. That was, if he could even hook his lariat on!

Fifteen days after the mishap, Devine spun the lariat for the first time. In mid-stream the mad current caught the heavy lasso, sweeping it far from the spot where the locomotive lay. The attempt had been a complete failure.

Again the bridge crane dragged the loop to the opposite shore. Once more Fred barked the command. The river again took the noose downstream. A third attempt was made. Just offshore, the line grew taut.

"We're hung up on a rock," a crewman informed Devine by telephone.

The cable was worked loose for another try. Again the loop came up empty. The other men were discouraged, but Devine never gives up. They examined the lasso. The steel showed flakes of paint. They had made contact, after all.

Devine ordered a deeper sweep. While everyone watched tensely, the loop plunged into the torrent. It strained, grew tight. The tackle blocks moved several feet, then slackened. The toss had been good but the slippery engine had shaken off the noose.

NEXT day the loop caught solidly on something. The cables moved. Ten . . . twenty . . . thirty . . . forty . . . fifty feet! Suddenly, at a point just beyond where the cable had disappeared, the river became smoother. The water level on the bank dropped 18 inches. The engine had been shifted sufficiently to change the river's flow.

Another hitch was taken in the lasso. The tractors leaned to their task. Something black broke the water's surface. A cheer went up. For the first time since that tragic night, sixteen days earlier, the diesel's dark hull was visible. Then there was a loud report. The thick cable snapped just above the water line. The locomotive settled back into its watery grave. Only a portion of the cab showed. The front end, where the bodies presumably lay, was three feet below the surface in very swift water.

Devine set his great block-and-tackle system for another pull. The diesel's rear shortly became snagged on an underwater ledge. One of Devine's veteran divers, Louis Smith, decided to risk going down. But he wasn't able to get inside the cab, and couldn't see in the murky water. He probed with a pole but felt nothing.

Smith made several more hazardous trips into the icy water to inspect the position of the wreckage. Dozens pushed heavy boulders into the torrent for a makeshift dam. When they had deflected the current enough, Smith worked his way cautiously into the engine and down the dark corridors. In one he found the engineer's drowned body. The fireman wasn't there. His body was found much later, far downriver.

Dynamite stick were set in the underwater ledge. The shattering blast cleared the way so the diesel could be dragged to shore. For the last time the cables strained. Twenty-three days after its death leap, the bedraggled, water-soaked locomotive was hauled ashore, where it could be dismantled.

With a self-satisfied grin, Devine began rolling up his great lariat. Spectators clapped him on the back and pumped his hand. They knew they would be talking about Fred Devine for a good long while around their campfires. You don't soon forget a man who can sling a lariat like that one!

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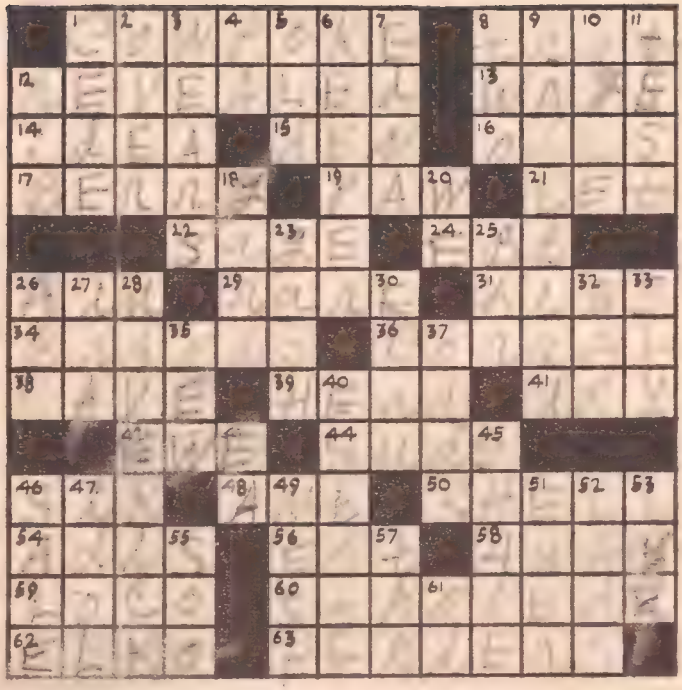
# THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



*The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue*

## ACROSS

1 Cowboy
8 Horse's gait
12 Disclosed
13 To carry on, as war
14 Notion
15 Dad's room
16 Lubricates
17 Small fruit
19 Cat's foot
21 To allow
22 Purplish western plant
24 To recede, as tides
26 To point a gun
29 Uncommon
31 Helps
34 Owners' marks on cattle
36 Cattle enclosure
38 Roof edge
39 Group of cattle
41 Not wet
42 Female sheep
44 Soapy water
46 Title of respect
48 Amount (abbr.)
50 Nut covering
54 Mine entrance
56 To take food
58 Not here
59 Poisonous western weed
60 Panicky rush of cattle
62 City in Nevada
63 Herdsmen

## DOWN

1 To surrender
2 Again
3 Has on
4 Dad
5 Not young
6 Prison officer
7 Girl's name
8 One and one
9 Fence-sitting rodeo watcher
10 To make eyes at
11 Examination
12 Chest bone
18 Three feet
20 You and I
23 Deep cut
25 Stripe
26 Abraham's nickname
27 Man's name
28 Unbranded calf
30 Unbleached
32 Daughters of Amer. Revolution (abbr.)
33 Foxy
35 Modern
37 — and ends
40 Landed property
43 Each (abbr.)
45 Form
46 Auction
47 Much loved person
49 Netting
51 Water pitcher
52 Boys
53 Alkaline solution
55 Also
57 Thick black liquid
61 Doctor of Medicine (abbr.)

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| A | L | S | O | | I | N | T | O | | E | N | D |

*Solution to puzzle in preceding issue*

# The Trail Ahead

*By Sam Brant*

THROUGH the cloud of dust Jake Hallis could see that the long snakelike column of wagons up ahead was beginning to slow down. That would mean the train was getting ready to form for the night halt. He called over to Dob Carter, and they began to bunch the cattle so that the herd would be easier to manage.

Jake rode mechanically, the long days on the trail having made every movement a habit. Scanning the area, he saw there wouldn't be much feed for the stock, and Crothers had said there wouldn't be any water until they reached the Platte. If there were, Crothers would have found it. The train was lucky to have him as a guide. Without his experience they could never have gone this far into the emptiness that stretched out interminably.

The train was closing in, wagons forming

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*JAKE HALLIS HAD restless feet, and stars in his eyes . . . but*

***there comes a time when the wildest young drifter has to grow up***

a tight circle against the possibility of Indians, when Tupper rode back to pass on Crothers's instructions about grazing the cattle. There was a little patch of dry grass off to the west, but there wouldn't be any drink. Jake cursed under his breath. That would make the critters mad, and they were trouble enough as it was.

Jake wondered why he had ever signed up with Tupper to drive his cattle to Oregon. It wasn't a fit job for any man; just a succession of monotonous weary hours in the saddle, swallowing dust, streaming sweat, swearing at the lumbering beasts that hadn't a brain in their fool heads.

Back in Independence it had seemed the thing to do. The trail had called him like a siren, firing his blood and promising excitement. At nineteen he was restless, wanting to be on the move. And then, if he needed any more urging, he had caught sight of Tupper's daughter, Hope.

But Jake thought now that his joining up had been a mistake. He was different from the rest of the men. They had a goal, the new life in virgin unsettled territory where, to hear them talk, the land was rich with undreamed-of promise. The thought of what lay ahead drove them on through the harsh country. But Jake didn't share their dreams. He had no mind for settling down for a while, in Oregon or anywhere.

Now he was fed up with the slow dragging train of creaking canvas-topped wagons, the bawling cows, the men and women who had become gaunt and bone-weary, and the spindling kids who were always getting in the way. He wondered how Crothers put up with them. He was like Jake, not built to be tied down.

Tupper was checking his cattle, his lined face cut with deep furrows. Jake thought he could see something deep behind the gray of the man's eyes—a hurt, pained look, maybe.

"They've lost a lot of weight already," Tupper remarked quietly, "and most of them have sore feet. I wish we could water them down."

Jake started to ask him what did he expect, but, seeing the pain Tupper seemed to be feeling, he changed his mind.

"If there were any water, Crothers would find it," Jake said.

Tupper nodded. Jake found himself pitying him a little. It meant a lot to Tupper to get through with his stock. That's why he took things hard. With a family you had responsibilities. Jake was glad he was still single.

LATER, when Jake rode into camp, Ma Tupper and Hope were working around the cookstove which had been unloaded from the wagon, and the smell of coffee and baking flapjacks mingled with the sharp odor of burning buffalo chips.

Jake hunkered down nearby, his eye following Hope as she attended to her tasks. Watching her always set up a strange pressure inside Jake, and he tried to snatch his attention away. But the girl's smooth easy movements and her serious concentration seemed to hypnotize him. The breeze that was springing up pressed the linsey-woolsey to her slim body, revealing the youthful rise of her breasts and the graceful flexing of her legs.

Jake wondered, as he often had, how much Hope had contributed to his taking up Tupper's offer. Something about the girl reached into him in a strange, frightening way—frightening because he knew that if he let his feelings run unchecked he wouldn't be free any more. That was the reason he tried to pretend she didn't matter to him. He had no mind for sticking around Oregon when the train arrived there.

Someday he'd talk to Crothers about heading back with him when the trip was over, for the guide wouldn't be settling down either. Jake could picture the time they'd have together—riding, hunting, making camp sometimes with the friendly Indian Crothers knew from back when he was trapping for pelts and hunting buffalo.

Crothers had told him many tales about life in the open wild country, tales that were like a whetstone to Jake's imagination. He'd best forget about Hope. She didn't fit in with what Jake figured on.

Like a fiery ball, the sun was sinking toward the horizon where the parched plain met the sky. Jake tore his gaze away from Hope,

scanned the circle made by the wagons, examined the family groups that clustered around the cook fires. There wasn't one of them that wasn't weighted down with cares, worries about the future.

Yes, it would be good hitting the mountains with Crothers, free as an eagle. And there were other women besides Hope. Crothers had said the squaws were friendly. Jake found his tongue licking his dry lips, and his cheeks were hot because it didn't seem right to be thinking thoughts like that with Hope so close.

Tupper came up then, lifting his legs slowly as if he found them heavy to move. Then, while the shadows lengthened, they ate. Jake noticed Ma Tupper watching her man while he picked at his food. She was a big, raw-boned woman, silent and strong.

Tupper set down his plate half finished and got up to set up the sleeping tent. Watching him in the twilight, Jake noticed a hollowness in the man's cheeks, and he wondered briefly if Tupper were sick. He was probably just worn out. Jake decided he'd go and find Crothers for a while, and then catch some sleep, because he'd have to be up at midnight to night-guard the stock.

He had moved off a little way, when he heard Hope calling his name. He stopped and swung around slowly, to find her running toward him. His heart began to tap more rapidly and he felt suddenly ill at ease and awkward, as if the arms dangling at his sides were too long.

"Mind if I talk to you a piece, Jake?" she asked as she came up to him.

Jake inclined his head. "Sure not."

She smiled at him wistfully. "You think we can take a walk?" she suggested.

He helped her between the wagons, fastened together with ox chains, out onto the plain beyond the camp. Behind them, the voices and clatter of the camp grew softer, and the breeze, freshening as the darkness increased, blew cool in Jake's face.

Hope kept very close to him, so that he could hear her soft breathing above the cruch of their boots against the ground. Jake felt as if he had grown older and was responsible for this quiet slip of a girl at his side. It was a good feeling, unlike anything he had ever known.

They had never been off together this way before, and it seemed to Jake to sort of put the two of them apart from the rest of the world, almost as if the aloneness was drawing them closer together, even, than they were. He didn't want to say anything. It would break the spell.

BUT after a little Hope cut in on the silence, her voice seeming small and timid. "Jake, I'm worried about Pa, awfully worried."

He stopped, caught her chin in his hand, and looked down into her troubled face, now vague and shadowy in the gloom. He felt a stab of concern for her, knowing what she meant.

"Reckon he's tired," he said.

She clung to his hand. "It's more than that, Jake," she went on urgently. "There's something wrong with him, some misery he's trying to pretend isn't there. If anything happen to him, I don't know what Ma and me would do."

Jake wished he knew what to do to ease her. Gruffly he said, "There isn't anything you can do. Your father will get better."

"It's getting worse, whatever it is. I've been watching."

Her worry edged deeper into him, making him uneasy. He tried to keep his tone level, so she wouldn't notice. "This is a hard trip, Hope. But it will come out all right. You wait and see."

For a moment she was silent. Then she said quietly, "I hope you're right, Jake. Please be right."

He found his arm circling her shoulder. A wild desire was filling him up, and the touch of her was making the blood rush crazily through him.

"Sure I'm right," he told her.

He felt a tremor pass over her, and he wished again that he could prevent her worrying about her father. She seemed to be snuggling up to him, trying to draw comfort from him.

"I hope you don't mind my talking this way," she whispered. "Ma doesn't pay me

any heed, somehow, but I think she's troubled too. You're the only one I can turn to."

Instead of answering, he bent his head forward and found her lips with his. She seemed to go limp in his arms, and he crushed her to him. He felt proud and humble all at once that she had come to him this way, and he wanted to stay there, with their lips together, while the night closed in around them. But she was pulling away.

"Oh, Jake," she breathed, "you've made me so happy. But we ought to be getting back."

Reluctantly, Jake let his hands fall to his sides. "Yeah, I suppose so."

"I feel easier now. I know I can count on you if anything happens."

"Sure, Hope. You can count on me."

He left her by the Tupper wagon. It was getting late and he needed some sleep, but first he wanted to see Crothers. He was getting mixed up, not sure of himself any more, and the old guide would help him straighten things out. He hadn't been able to help letting himself go with Hope, but that wouldn't do. First thing he knew he'd be hog-tied to her, and then he wouldn't be free any more. He sort of forgot that when he was with her. It was almost as if a part of him wanted to be hog-tied.

His confusion began to quiet as he found Crothers sitting with Malloch, the train captain, and some of the other men, around a dying fire. The guide's face was sharp and leathery in the flickering light. When he caught sight of Jake he ran a gnarled hand through his grizzled hair and smiled thinly, as if greeting a kindred spirit.

"But we can't go too long without water," Malloch said gruffly. "Those critters will be going crazy if they don't get some drink."

Crothers spat on the ground. "I'm not much of a cattle man," he said in his rusty voice. "Maybe we'll lose some stock, but most will get through. Anyway there's no water for two, maybe three days. You folks knew this wasn't a pleasure excursion before you set out."

His tone suggested he wasn't interested in any arguments. The group felt silent. Jake's admiration of Crothers increased. Without him these men would be lost, like little kids.

He wished he could have the same self-reliance, so that he wouldn't get mixed up just because a girl felt good in his arms. Well, maybe if he stuck to Crothers he'd learn how to be that way.

THEN Crothers spoke directly to him. "Son," he said, "I was wondering if you'd want to scout with me in the morning. You have to get away from those ornery critters once in a while. Like as not we might run into some white flanks to take a shot at."

Jake felt his chest expanding. It was the first time Crothers had asked for his company. He recognized that they were alike, different from the rest of these men.

"Reckon I'd like that," he answered quickly, "if Tupper will help with the stock."

Malloch stirred uneasily. "The cows will be skittish tomorrow," he said slowly, "and I don't reckon Tupper is feeling so good. Better make it another time, Jake."

Jake tightened up, feeling anger flare up inside him. He resented Malloch's butting in that way. "I figure Tupper can speak for himself," Jake retorted.

"Won't hurt Tupper," Crothers said. "He has some wagon fever, most likely. That won't kill him."

Malloch didn't say any more. After a little he stood up and moved off into the darkness. The other men followed.

When they had gone, Jake looked up into the star-glittering sky and said bashfully, "I've been wanting to ride out with you."

Crothers had taken out a pipe. He crammed shag into the bowl, and lit it with a spluttering match.

"Sort of figured you did," he said, drawing in a puff of smoke. "I'm not entirely easy with these folk. They aren't the same as I'm used to. My kind of men are dying off, Jake. They took what came and never fretted, but these folk are always worrying about their women, their cows, and what's going to happen tomorrow. Shucks, the way I learned it, you can only live today."

Jake was thinking about Hope. He tried to push her out of his mind. "You and I are different," he said. "We're the restless kind. We like to be on the move."

Crothers's eyes were staring out beyond the glowing coals of the dying fire. "I'm getting along in years," he said. "I guess that's why I get peeved with these nesting folk, because their ideas are strange to me. Well, son, you riding with me in the morning?"

"Yeah. I reckon I will."

Jake got up then, leaving Crothers to his pipe and the fire. The camp was quiet now except for the snores of sleeping men and the rustling of hobbled horses.

Jake rolled up in his blankets in the bed of the Tupper wagon. It wasn't easy to go to sleep. He remembered being alone with Hope out on the darkening plain and the way her lips had tasted, so warm and fresh and eager. She would make a man a wife he could be proud of, Jake thought. If he were the kind to settle down—but he wasn't. That was an end to it. A man couldn't have everything.

Jake wondered, too, if Tupper's herding the cows would make his sickness worse. Tupper had treated him well, almost like one of the family. Jake thought about all the dust back there with the cows, and the hard riding to keep the critters from drifting off.

Still, Crothers had said Tupper only had wagon fever, whatever that was. It must be something you got over after a while, like a bellyache. Jake wanted to ride out with Crothers. Well, he'd ask Tupper in the morning, and leave it up to him.

WHEN Jake rode in to breakfast he was bone weary from guarding the cattle. They had been restless, nerved up from their thirst, keeping him constantly on the go. Now, as he gulped a mug of steaming coffee, he saw that Tupper was standing beside him.

He said bluntly, "Crothers asked me to scout with him today. Can you tend to the cows?"

He saw the tired sag at the corners of Tupper's mouth and the dry look of his skin. Tupper was sick all right, Jake thought. But he wasn't in any mood to care. Watching a few cows wasn't going to kill Tupper, and Jake wanted to be up there with Crothers. That's where he really belonged—up ahead, scout-

*"Did you have to pick 'our tree' to make a canoe?"*

ing, reading the trail. He wasn't any cow whacker.

"Sure, Jake," Tupper answered. "About time you had a day off."

Jake shifted his weight from one leg to the other. He was aware that Hope was staring at him, and he let his eyes drop to the ground. He was thinking he was a fool to have encouraged her last night. Now maybe she'd realize how it really was; that he had to look out for himself and had no place in his plans for her.

Her voice, low and accusing, dug into him like the point of a knife. "Pa doesn't feel good, Jake. Why don't you ride with Crothers some other day?"

Truculently he answered, "Crothers might not ask me again. Anyway, a feller gets mighty fed up nursing those critters."

That's what happened when you started paying attention to women, he thought. They started crowding in on you.

"Pa ought to ride in the wagon until he feels better," Hope went on.

"Oh, I'm all right," Tupper cut in. "Jake, you go along with Crothers if you've a mind to."

He had won, Jake thought. He finished his coffee hurriedly, not wanting to be around with Hope, not wanting to be reminded that Tupper didn't look well. But having the day start this way had taken some of the edge off it. He wasn't even sure any more that he wanted to scout with Crothers. Looking at Tupper's sagging shoulders, he felt a grudging admiration for the man's fortitude. Tupper wanted to make Oregon bad, and he wasn't giving in for a touch of fever.

Even out there ahead, riding with Crothers across the plain, the gnawing guilt didn't leave Jake. He kept looking back at the straggling string of wagons, followed by the loose horses, and then, half hidden in the dust, the cattle, with the moving dots of the riders keeping the cows on the move.

Crothers talked little. His keen eyes swept the wilderness ahead, checking for Indians and picking out the way through the gullies and over the rises for the train behind. He left markers, pieces of rag tied to a stick, for the lead driver to follow. A small herd of antelope bounded off far to the west, but the guide gave no suggestion of noticing them, although Jake fingered his rifle restlessly.

The day was hot, with the dry air beating into Jake's face, and it seemed unnaturally still. The few clouds building up in the south looked like wisps of black smoke. Once Crothers hauled up to rest their horses.

So abruptly that Jake was startled, he said, "That Hope Tupper is a right nice gal."

Jake felt his cheeks flush. "She's all right, I guess."

Crothers's leathery face held no emotion. "With a woman on your hands, there's no two ways about it," he remarked casually. "A man's got to settle down."

"I aim to keep on moving."

"Sure, son," Crothers said, nodding. Then he pointed into the growing bank of clouds. "Reckon there's wind getting ready out there —a twister, maybe."

They rode on then, Jake feeling more edgy as the time went on. He decided it was because he hadn't slept enough. Crothers seemed to notice it too, and he began talking, telling Jake about one time when he'd been caught in the mountains in a bad blizzard. Jake only half took it in. It seemed he couldn't keep his mind on anything.

AND then, abruptly, Jake caught sight of the dark funnel-like cone that stretched between the earth and the mass of clouds. The cone was coming toward them, racing across the plain. Jake felt his muscles stretch taut, and every nerve was like a strung bow. He called out to Crothers.

"Sure, a twister," the guide said. "Most likely it'll miss us. Might spook the cows, though."

Jake thought suddenly of Tupper, sick, maybe having to control a wild herd of beasts already keyed up from thirst. He whirled his horse around.

"I'm going back," he said. "They'll be needing all the hands they can muster to look after the cows."

He heard Crothers's words scraping at his ears as he started to pull away.

"Always figured you for a cow man."

He remembered urging his mount forward,

driving the heart out of his horse, seeing the twisting cone coming closer and knowing, before he had covered half the distance, that he would arrive too late. Then, as he topped a gentle rise, he began to hear the roar of the swirling wind.

The compact mass of cattle behind the train seemed somehow to explode, and he knew that it had happened. He kept on, though, his breath tight in his pounding chest, circling out around the train so he could head off the thundering charge of stampeding cattle.

A strange fever gripped him. He was a man, pitting his wits and strength against headstrong brute instinct, and he must whip them, bend them to his will, or they would crush him. Vaguely he was conscious that the tornado had passed beyond the train. Then he saw Dob Carter and Malloch and Tupper breaking out after the stampede.

Jake was directly in the path of the oncoming charge, and he reined in and lifted his rifle. If he could frighten the cows with the noise of his shots and turn them back, the others could surround them and start the crazed bunch milling. If the herd continued wild in this waterless expanse, it would take precious time to round them up, time they couldn't afford if they were to reach water before it was too late to save most of the cattle.

The rifle kicked against his shoulder, sounding very ineffectual against the pounding hoofs. Jake fired again, and still there was no change of direction in the onrushing mass of flesh. Under him the ground trembled, and he felt the sweat coming out, making his hands sweaty against the rifle stock. If this didn't work, in a few moments he'd be trampled under the pawing hoofs. He sucked in his breath and kept on firing.

It happened so suddenly Jake was almost unaware that the raging mass had changed direction. He kicked his horse forward again so that he would get into a position where he could help the others start the milling.

And then he saw the riderless horse and recognized the animal as Tupper's favorite mount. A sickening dread washed through him. What had happened to Tupper? He shouldn't have let the man, weakened by his sickness, take over the trailing of the cows. If there was an accident it would be his fault. And he had told Hope she could count on him. A bitter self-reproach rose in him. A feller who didn't stick by his word didn't amount to much.

He never could recall the details of what happened after that. There was dust, choking this throat and blinding his eyes. There were the shouts of men, the heavy lumbering hulks of cows, the snorts of his tired lathered horse. They told him later that he rode like a madman, and did the work of two people. But he only knew that inside him there was a shame that drove him blindly toward doing Tupper's job as well as his own.

When at last it was over and Jake rode in, the train had halted. He found a group gathered around the Tupper wagon. The sleeping tent had been set up and Jake pushed his way between the people, not wanting to find out what had happened, yet unable to keep away. But as he tried to go inside the tent, Hope stepped up to him, barring his entrance.

"No, Jake, you'd better not go in," she said quietly.

"Is he bad?"

He could read the answer in her expression, and it meant more than her words.

"Yes, Jake, he's bad. Broke a leg and maybe some ribs, and got shaken up from the fall. He was too weak to be out there riding." There was no accusation, no bitterness, only a deadening futility in her tone.

JAKE stepped back, into the crowd, thinking that this girl was a pretty brave kid. He stood there a while, waiting. The folks around talked among themselves in low tones. Mrs. Malloch came out of the tent, went away, and returned with a pail of hot water. He wished he knew just what was going on. He was part of the Tupper outfit, he loved Hope, he belonged with them, and he ought to share their troubles.

Yet they were treating him now as an outsider, and he knew why. It was because he didn't share their dreams. He was only here for the ride, to satisfy the restlessness that was in him. So he was alone, apart.

He wondered what would happen if Tupper died. It was too late for the family to turn back. The others in the train would pitch in and help them, but it would be a hard life for these women.

In a quiet way these folks were very brave, he decided. They had left the life they had known to start out anew in a strange unbroken land, buoyed up by faith in themselves. They were not like him and Crothers, moved by a selfish restlessness, afraid of ties or solid work. They built, while he and Crothers sat around whittling. It took more guts to strive than to drift.

Jake edged away, out of the crowd around the tent, and began walking slowly along the line of wagons. A little way off some children played, unconscious of the drama that was being unfolded in the tent back there. In years to come they were the ones who would benefit from the vision of their parents.

A sort of fierce proudness began building up inside Jake, thinking about things that way. He was a part of making this dream of a future come true. But it was a future he'd never share in.

He thought that he wouldn't stay on with the train any longer than was necessary. If he didn't belong, he'd best strike out for himself as soon as possible. Remaining would only increase the hurt of not belonging. Maybe at Laramie the Tuppers could find a new driver. Jake didn't know what he'd do then, but it didn't matter.

Sitting down in the shade of a wagon, he waited, letting time flow past him, knowing it would take a lot of time to wipe out the self reproach that lay so heavily in him. He heard footsteps, but he didn't look up. He was startled when he heard Crothers's rusty old voice speaking to him.

"Don't reckon you feel much like jawing now, son," the guide remarked. "You'll be wanting to puzzle things out for yourself."

"Is he dead?" Jake asked.

"No, Tupper isn't dead. And I reckon he'll pull through, though it's going to be a mighty hard trip for him. You're thinking, son, that it's your fault."

"Maybe. It doesn't matter. You think they could get another driver up ahead?"

Crothers settled down beside him. Jake watched him take out his pipe and carefully knock the dottle out of it.

"You ought to keep going to Oregon, son."

"No. I'm pulling out. I don't belong with these folks."

"That gal Hope will need you. Tupper'll be laid up a long while."

Jake shrugged. "There are other men," he said gruffly.

Crothers said, "I'm not one for giving advice, but what I was saying last night is something maybe you'd want to think over. My kind of men are dying off. There's a reason, Jake. It's on account of our not being needed any more. Steady folk are moving in, settling, building the country up."

"About all the use us old timers are, now that the trappings scarce, is for showing the steady folk how to get where they're going. And mighty soon the trails will be so worn we won't even be necessary for that."

"A feller can still drift."

"Sure. You're young, son. You've got stars in your eyes and you can't decide which way to head, and you're restless. But that's just growing up. You were really born too late to get any satisfaction out of drifting. I reckon if you set your mind on going some place and making something of yourself, you wouldn't be restless any more."

HE GOT up and moved away. Jake sat there. He couldn't seem to get Hope out of his mind. He remembered again how she had felt in his arms, and her quiet, sure strength. Yet she was a woman, too, needing a man to give her comfort and assurance. If they had a place of their own in Oregon, it wouldn't be bad. It was new territory, where a man could make what he wanted of himself. But she wouldn't have him now, after the way he had caused her father's accident.

But maybe he'd go on with them, looking after the Tuppers' cows until they reached Oregon. They'd need a man with the outfit with Tupper laid up. Then, when they reached their destination, he'd look around and stake out some land. It wouldn't be the same, starting out by himself without Hope, but it would be interesting to see what he could do for

himself. They said it was rich country.

He felt surer of himself as he went back to the Tupper wagon. All that had happened made it easier to understand himself. He thought it must have been not belonging that had made him restless, and he felt now that he sort of belonged.

Outside the tent, he called softly to Hope. When she came out he stood there, not feeling awkward any more, but wanting to tell her how he felt.

"I guess I was pretty stubborn," he said to her, "and I'm sorry it had to be me that made things bad for your father. But it sort of made me understand things better, and I'll make it up to you all, sure."

Her smile was quiet and grave.

"I know, Jake," she said. "I reckon we all have to learn what we're like inside. Sometimes it takes a lot of trouble before we get around to learning. I was proud, Jake, to hear how you headed off the stampede."

He hadn't intended to take her in his arms, but she seemed to be expecting it, and now he was with her he didn't think he could help himself.

As he bent down to find her lips he figured that the trail ahead was all mapped out, and it was a good trail taking him where he wanted to go.

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# KNOW YOUR WEST

***The zodiacal sign of Gemini, the Twins, will be ascendant about the time you read this, so let's fall in line with the word "twin" for our quiz theme this time.***

**1. Cows do not often have twins. What about Angora goats, also widely raised in the west?**

**2. About 20 miles southeastward through Beaverhead National Forest from the town of Twin Bridges is an outlaw hideout called Robbers' Roost. Nearby is the famous old mining town of Virginia City, still looking pretty much as it did in frontier days. In what state?**

**3. The name of what well-known city in the state of Washington is a pair of twin Indian words?**

**4. What do cowboys imply when they say that some ranchman's cows all have twins?**

**5. Only middling western, one of the Twin Cities is east of the Mississippi, the other west of it. Name these cities.**

**6. There is a ranch country postoffice in New Mexico called Cuates (KWAH-tace). Most southwestern cowpokes know what this Spanish word means. Do you?**

**7. Which two northern cow-and-wheat country states are often called The Twin States?**

**8. Texas trail herds used the pass near Twin Sisters in Blanco County about 40 miles southwest of Austin—in what state?**

**9. Was there any pair of twins among the following "brother groups" of old west outlaws or gunmen: James, Ford, Dalton, Earp and Ketchum brothers.**

**10. Do western mule deer ever have twins?**

***—Rattlesnake Robert.***

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**You will find the answers to these questions on page 113.** **Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.**

# A Man on the Place

***By Elsa Barker***

MOLLY ELLISON brushed a lock of sweat-dampened brown hair from a wet brow and shoved her hat to the back of her head. She wiped grimy hands down the sides of her levis, eyeing the fresh splice in the rusty barbed wire with tired eyes. That made twelve splices and three rotted posts in less than a mile of fence.

Next year she would surely have to build a new fence, and where the money was coming from she didn't know. If it weren't for the money she had been sending Bill Morgan, she could get by. She could hire one good hand and run the ranch like it ought to be run.

With a grim tightening of the lips, she made herself stop that line of thinking. It only made her mad all over again, and she was too tired and thirsty to get mad.

She reached for the canteen on her saddle, shook it once, and found it empty. She eyed the scrawny figure of the ten-year-old boy, now busy stomping sand in an ant hill, with something less than tender affection.

"Willie, have you been shooting at prairie dogs again?"

He turned and looked at her, then at the canteen in her hand. For a moment guilt was plain on his face. Then he squared his shoulders.

"Don't call me Willie—call me Bill."

It was an old argument between them, but Molly didn't care to pursue it now. She couldn't tell the boy that she didn't call him Bill because that was his father's name—and Bill Morgan was a complete no-good.

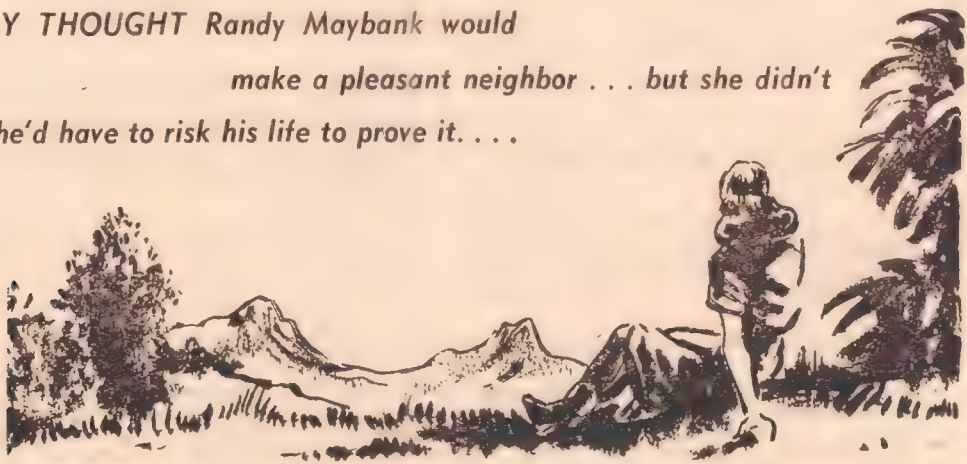
"We'll ride over to the spring on Oshá Draw and get a drink. I want to check the fence that way anyhow, because we'll have to turn cattle in this pasture next week."

She stepped across her horse and waited for the boy, but he stayed where he was. A big, old pistol came out of his sagging holster and was pointed at her horse.

"Call me Bill or I'll shoot your horse and make him buck you off."

For a moment anger flared in Molly's blue eyes. She swore mentally at Uncle Nat for

*MOLLY THOUGHT Randy Maybank would make a pleasant neighbor . . . but she didn't know he'd have to risk his life to prove it. . . .*



*The stranger was a good-looking man—tall, lean and blue-eyed*

rigging up one of his old guns as a water pistol for the boy to play with.

"Come on, silly," she said, and realized again that her voice had gotten in the habit of sounding always sharp and shrill. "I'm too tired to fight now. I'll race you to the spring."

Willie reached for his reins and pulled himself into the saddle, but they didn't race long. The day was too hot, and the old mare the boy was riding soon grew winded. But even the brief spurt was enough to brush some of the cobwebs of weariness from the girl's brain, to dry and cool her sweat-dotted face. For a minute she felt like she used to feel—that it was good to be alive and young and able to ride over these hills and valleys that she loved.

THEN she saw the cowboy building a fence around the spring in Oshá Draw, and the surge of tired resentment came back. The spring was on the old Melloch

place, where for two years no one had lived or run cattle. Before that Molly's father had had an agreement with old Charlie Melloch whereby Ellison's Diamond E cattle could share the spring.

Now some strange cowboy was putting up a new fence that would shut off Diamond E. Without the water in that spring, a whole section of Molly's best grassland would be worthless, unless she could somewhere scrape up enough money to dig a well and put in a windmill. The way things were right now, that was about as possible as a trip to the moon on a soda cracker.

Willie cried shrilly, "Look, Molly, there's a man building a fence around our spring!"

A dog at the cowboy's side raised his head and barked, and the cowboy turned. Molly rode on down.

The cowboy's eyes rested briefly on the brand on her horse's hip. "Howdy, ma'am," he greeted her pleasantly. "I reckon you must be Miss Ellison from the Diamond E. My name's Randy Maybank."

He was grimy and sweat drenched, and had a week's growth of black beard on his face. But even so he was a good-looking man, tall and lean, with sharp blue eyes in a pleasant face.

For a moment she was sorry she wasn't cleaned up and rested. She knew that two limp locks of usually curly brown hair were straggling down just in front of her ears; her nose was sunburned, her lips chapped. She knew that hard work and worry had thinned her down until she was almost skinny, and that frequent bad temper had put a wrinkle between her eyebrows.

Thinking about it didn't put her in any better humor now. She looked Randy Maybank over and saw that he was obviously a cowboy. If he had any range sense at all he should know that other cattle used this water.

"Fixing to fence us off this water, are you?" she asked sharply.

The friendly smile faded from the man's afce. "This spring's on my land," he said mildly. "I didn't notice any fresh cow tracks around."

"The Diamond E always uses this spring in the summer," Molly told him sharply. "Nobody ever tried to fence us out before. Even if it is on your land, you're certainly not very neighborly to try to hog it all."

His eyes raked her over again. "I'm not wasting my time figuring out ways to be neighborly," he said bluntly. "I just aim to mind my own business and run my ranch, and I expect my neighbors to do likewise."

His gaze suddenly swerved away from her, and Molly's followed. Willie had his big gun out and was aiming it at the cowboy's middle.

"You aren't going to build any more fence today, mister! Get your horse and start riding."

The cowboy stared up at him, a flicker of indecision in his eyes. He didn't look exactly scared, but he did look startled and cautious. Molly didn't blame him. That deadly old gun in the hands of a ten-year-old boy was something to think about. She resisted the impulse to laugh.

"Willie, put that gun down," she ordered. "I've told you before never to point it at people."

The gun wavered but didn't come down. He turned his head toward her. "Bill, darn it! My name isn't Willie."

"William David Morgan, you put that gun down!"

He whirled the gun suddenly. A small stream of water spurted out, hitting Molly's horse in the flank.

MOLLY was in no real trouble. She didn't try to make a rodeo ride. At the first spooked jump, she grabbed the horn with one hand, while with the other she yanked hard on the reins before the pony had time to get his head down. A few half-hearted crow hops and she reined him around, heading for Willie with fire in her eyes.

The cowboy beat her to him. He hauled the kid out of the saddle, turned him over his knee and landed a couple of hard wallops with the flat of his hand on the small, lean bottom.

He picked up the pistol the boy had dropped, squirted the rest of the water on the ground, and handed it back to Willie. He looked at Molly, and suddenly she smiled.

"Thanks," she said. "He needed that."

"Don't mention it," said the cowboy. "I'd have given him more, but I didn't much blame him. A man's kind of particular about his name. Why don't you call him Bill like he wants?"

"None of your business," Molly said coolly. "Come on, Willie, let's go."

This time the boy obeyed. He pulled himself awkwardly back into the saddle. He took the gun the cowboy handed him and tucked it into its canvas holster. One thing about Willie, Molly thought with a flash of pride, he sure wasn't a cry baby.

"My dad will kill you for that," he told the cowboy.

"Come on, Willie," Molly said.

She had a sort of half-pleasant, half-embarrassed feeling that her new neighbor was standing watching her as they rode away, and when she looked back he was.

After a bath and a half-hour's rest Molly felt better. As a sop to feminine pride she had put on a dress. It was an old one, but it was the same soft, deep shade of blue as her eyes, and the white ruffled collar did flattering things to her face.

Through the open door she could hear Willie and Uncle Nat talking while they finished the evening chores. Through the dusk she saw Willie's puppy go galloping across the yard. He threw his big front feet around the boy's leg, caught Willie's pants in his teeth, and tugged. Willie stumbled and almost went down. Molly heard him laugh. He tousled the pup's ears, threw his arms around the scrawny neck, and hugged him hard. The pup licked the boy's chin and Willie laughed again.

Willie's affection for that pup was his most endearing quality, about the only sign that the girl's critical eyes had yet seen that he stood some chance of not growing up to be a heel like his father.

Willie began talking to Uncle Nat again, bragging as usual, this time about how he had run the stranger away from the waterhole with the gun Uncle Nat had fixed up for him.

Molly's lips curled scornfully. "Men!" she said contemptuously, and then partially amended the blanket indictment to exclude Uncle Nat. Uncle Nat wasn't actually worth his weight in cactus thorns, but she liked having him around.

Willie was different. Although he had been on the Diamond E for four years, even in his best moments Molly had never been able to feel much more than lukewarm liking for him. Willie was an aggravating nuisance, and right now the ranch was under a five-thousand dollar mortgage becaues she had to make constant payments to Willie's father for the privilege of putting up with him.

Uncle Nat limped in with a bucket of milk and set it on the table. He wiped his hands down the sides of clean levis.

"Think I'll ride in to town for some corn plasters, Molly. Don't fix me any supper. I'll get something in town."

"All right. But remember, the doctor said not more than two 'somethings' at one time."

He blinked at her solemnly. "I wasn't even aiming to go near the saloon," he said in an injured tone.

Molly laughed, and reached for the kerosene lamp on the shelf over the sink. As she started supper she let her mind drift back to the cowboy who had bought the old Melloch place. She wondered what he had thought of her.

Tomorrow, she thought, she would ride over there again and ask him nicely if some arrangement could be made so that the Diamond E could share the spring water. She would wear a becoming shirt, and her face would be clean.

IT WAS after dark when she called Willie in from playing with the pup. He came in flushed and tousled and dirty.

"Where's Uncle Nat?"

Molly slid hot biscuits from a pan onto a plate. "He went to town."

"You reckon he'll get drunk again?" Willie asked.

Molly frowned. "Wash your hands and face, Willie. Supper's ready."

He made a face at her. "Quit calling me Willie!"

But he went over to the sink, drew a little water in a wash pan, dipped his fingers in it gingerly, rubbed his face lightly, and wiped a lot of smudge on the towel.

"Uncle Nat—"

The door was shut, but they both heard the sound of a cowboy's full, rich baritone singing "Oh, Susanna!" Outside, the pup barked shrilly.

Willie gave a wild yell, yanked the door open, and ran outside.

Molly put up a hand as if to loosen her collar, then with a calm face moved to the back door.

A slender cowboy with curly black hair and dancing black eyes stepped across the yard into the path of light thrown by the lamp. He lifted Willie high in his arms, held him tight for a moment, then set him down again. He turned a smiling face to the girl standing on the porch.

"Hello, Molly."

"What are you doing here, Bill?"

"That doesn't sound like a very warm welcome, honey," he said.

He crossed the half-dozen steps to the porch, put one hand on her shoulder, the other under her chin, and kissed her unresponding lips. He ran the hand up over her cheek with a caressing gesture.

"Aren't you the least bit glad to see me, Molly?"

"No," said the girl, and wondered if he could possibly guess that she lied. Probably he did, because he laughed. Bill Morgan knew all there was to know about girls.

Now Willie was tugging at his father's belt.

"You're going to stay awhile, aren't you, dad? And when you go you'll take me with you, won't you?"

Bill Morgan tousled the boy's rough hair, but he kept his eyes on the girl's tight, unsmiling face.

"Why, now, we'll see about that," he said easily. "I reckon I'll stay as long as Molly will let me."

"You may as well come in to supper," she said ungraciously. "It's ready."

The pup had decided that maybe he liked Bill Morgan, and he was ready for more play. He hurtled against the cowboy and wrapped big forepaws around his leg. Molly had turned for the door and didn't see that part of it, but she heard the pup yell, she heard Bill Morgan swear, and she turned just in time to see his boot toe lift the pup off the ground and send him tumbling a dozen feet away.

The pup yelped again as he hit the ground, then ran whimpering to the corner of the porch.

Willie gave a little cry that sounded as sharp and hurt as the pup's, and went to comfort his cringing, trembling pet.

"That was a mean thing to do, Bill," said Molly.

She bent over the dog, petted his rough head, then touched the boy on the cheek.

"He isn't really hurt, Willie."

The boy raised his head, sniffled once, wiped his fist across his eyes, then turned and went in the house.

Bill Morgan shrugged. "Funny kid, isn't he?"

SUPPER was a strained, uneasy meal. Willie talked some, but his big windy about how he had backed down the stranger on the old Melloch place with his water pistol, lacked his usual shrill fire. Bill Morgan was trying his best—and his best was pretty good—to be charming.

Molly sat still, warily waiting to learn what had brought Bill back. He wanted something, of course—probably money again. Pretty soon he would start making veiled threats to take Willie away with him if he didn't get it. Molly recognized his deft, roundabout way of starting his build-up. He was working on Willie now, being nice to him, trying to cure the resentment his thoughtless kick at the pup had caused.

For once Bill didn't seem to be doing much good.

In the middle of one of his best stories, about how he had ridden a man-killing outlaw in the Cheyenne rodeo, Willie stood up.

"Guess I'll go to bed, Molly."

It was the first time in the four years he had been on the Diamond E that he had gone to bed without an arguemnt. Bill Morgan looked surprised for a moment, then leaned over and patted the boy's head.

"Goodnight, son."

The boy didn't answer. He took a short, dark bottle from a shelf behind Molly's back,

picked up his water-shooting .45 from a bench, and went out.

Molly got up to get the coffee pot. She waited until the door closed behind the boy, then asked quietly, "How much do you want this time, Bill?"

"I want *you,* Molly."

The coffee splashed in his cup so that he drew his hand back with a jerk. He missed seeing the quick flush that stained her cheeks.

He wiped his hand with a napkin. "I really always have, Molly. You know there's always been something special between us. I love you and I think you love me."

Damn him! Molly thought viciously, as she carried the coffee pot back to the stove. His eyes are so straight and his voice so gentle he would fool anybody. And he's really such a no-good stinker!

For a moment her thoughts went back to the summer she was fifteen—a big-eyed, skinny, freckle-faced kid, wild with the hurting jealousy of a hopeless first love. That was the summer Bill had married Amy.

She was twenty-two the summer Amy, beaten and ill and sick at heart, crept back to the Diamond E with her small son. These days people weren't supposed to die of broken hearts, but Molly knew they did. She had seen it happen to Amy.

She had known then for sure what kind of man Bill Morgan was, but she had still felt the almost irresistable pull of his expressive dark eyes, whimsical humor, and virile, masculine charm. If he had asked her then what he was asking her now, she might have been fool enough to go with him.

Now she laughed contemptuously. "Do you think I'm a complete fool, Bill?"

"I think you're wonderful," said Bill gently. "I always did. I would have married you instead of Amy, only you were so damned young." He leaned across the table and put a hand on hers. Molly started to pull her hand away, then let it stay.

"I wouldn't blame you if you hated me, Molly. I've got no excuse to offer for the way I treated Amy, except that I was too young for married responsibility. And Amy never had the spirit and spunk that you have. I'd be good to you, Molly. Don't let the past come between us."

HE GOT up, came around the table, and and lifted her to her feet. Molly's color was high and her heart was pounding hard. She let him kiss her once, then suddenly pushed him away.

"The old magic doesn't work any more, Bill," she said, and laughed. "Drink your coffee."

"I'm sorry, Molly. I shouldn't have tried to hurry you like that. I should have waited and given you a chance to see that I've changed. But I've been thinking about you so much—wanting you—"

He stopped when Molly shook her head. "I'm blowing the whistle on you right now, cowboy. You can finish your supper, then you've got to be on your way. You're no

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# DANGER AHEAD!

**By LIMERICK LUKE**

**A bold buckarooster of Gallup,**
**With a pretty young squaw tried to pal up;**
**But her pappy said, "Ugh!**
**You tryum one hug,**
**Me liftum your hair for a scalup!"**

good, Bill. The country would have to be mighty short of men before I'd consider taking you."

"Think about young Bill. He needs two parents. He needs his father."

Molly's laugh was flat and mirthless. "He doesn't need *you!*"

"Molly, honey—"

"No sale, Bill. I mean it! And no more money to make you clear out, either. You've blackmailed me for years, because Amy begged me to never let you take her boy away. I won't give you another cent. I know now that blackmailers never quit."

Bill smiled, but with no gentleness now.

"Your father died before Amy did," he said. "Half of the Diamond E should legally belong to her heirs—her husband and her son. And any court in the country would give the boy a voice in picking his own guardian. I'll give you twenty-four hours to think it over."

Molly's lips tightened. "Get out!"

"O. K." He came around the table and dropped a hand lightly on her shoulder. "I'm sorry it had to be this way, baby. I meant it when I said I wanted to marry you."

His hands suddenly caught her arms again and lifted her to her feet. This time Molly was ready for him. She let him lift her, but twisted suddenly out of his grasp. She swung an arm and slapped him hard. His hands slacked as she backed away.

"I told you to get out!"

"In my own time," said Bill. He reached for her again. "Molly, give me a chance."

"If you touch me again I'll kill you!"

The screen door opened and a tall cowboy stepped inside. "Good evening, folks," said Randy Maybank politely.

Molly Ellison gasped. Bill Morgan swore. His head swivelled around as if jerked by a wire.

"Excuse me for not knocking," said Randy Maybank blandly, "but the door was open and it sounded like you were busy. Anything I can do for you, ma'am?" He was talking to Molly, but he kept his eyes on Bill Morgan.

"I'm glad you came." Molly turned to Bill Morgan again. "I don't need twenty-four hours, Bill. The answer is no. You may get Willie and half of this ranch, but you'll have to fight me through every court in the land. I won't just hand them over."

"You're making a mistake, Molly."

"I made worse ones the times I gave you money."

Bill Morgan picked up his hat. He twirled it a couple of times on his finger, then put it on slowly, giving care to give it just the right rakish tilt. His eyes gave Randy Maybank a good going over and noted the clean blue shirt and tie, the fresh shave, the shined boots.

"You the feller Billy was saying bought the old Melloch place?"

"That's right."

"Bill—" began Molly sharply.

He turned and smiled at her. "Good night, honey."

Molly closed the door after him and leaned against it. "Thank you for coming in. He was getting hard to handle."

"The kid's father?"

"Yes. He was my sister's husband."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"There's nothing anyone can do." Her shoulders drooped and she looked completely done in. "I talked big, but I was bluffing. He's got me beat before I start."

"He wants the kid?"

"He doesn't really care anything about him. He wants money, and he's using Willie as a club. Willie's big enough now so a judge would listen to him, and he idolizes his father. Given his choice, he would go with Bill tomorrow." Her lips drew in to a tight, bitter line. "Bill's a complete stinker. I'm not so crazy about keeping Willie myself—he's hard to handle and he doesn't like me very well—but I promised Amy I'd look after him and I intend to do it."

RANDY MAYBANK said nothing.

"He wants half of the ranch," Molly went on bitterly.

Randy shrugged. "And you're going to give it to him—" he snapped his fingers—"just like that?"

At something in his tone the girl's chin upped a notch.

"Just like that." she agreed evenly.

The cowboy said in disgust, "I had you figured for a fighter."

It didn't take much to make Molly mad these days. Sparks flashed in her eyes. "Maybe you better go before you start giving me advice!"

Randy Maybank picked up his hat. "Maybe I had." At the door he turned. "I almost forgot what I come over for. It was to tell you that I can shift my fence line so that Diamond E cattle can water at my spring. If that section of the range is on Bill Morgan's half maybe you'll pass the message on to him."

Her chin was still high. "You'd better make your arrangements with the new owner. I'm selling the ranch as soon as possible, and dividing the money with Bill."

"Yes, ma'am," said Randy Maybank politely. He went out, closing the door gently behind him.

Molly looked after him, the defiance melting from her face, leaving her forlorn and beaten again. She had a strong impulse to call after him and say she was sorry she had sounded so snippy, but she made herself resist it. She put up a hand and wiped away the two tears that started to trickle down the side of her nose.

Now that he was gone she was ready to admit to herself that she had been strongly moved by some quality of warmth, and strength, and friendliness that emanated from Randy Maybank. He liked me too, she thought, or he wouldn't have bothered to shave and shine his boots and wear his good clothes tonight. And now, darn it, he'll never come back.

She wiped two more tears away, then got up and started stacking the supper dishes. She glanced at the clock on the wall and saw that it would probably be hours before she could expect Uncle Nat to be home. For some reason that she didn't quite understand herself, the thought made her uneasy.

It didn't make sense. She had never been afraid to stay by herself, and Uncle Nat wouldn't be any real help in time of trouble anyhow. Still, she wished he were here tonight, if only because his good-natured chatter would keep her from thinking.

The uneasy feeling persisted. It was silly but suddenly giving in to it, Molly dried the dishwater from her hands and looked in the drawer where the keys to the front and back door were kept. It had been years since either door was locked, and she couldn't remember when she had last seen the keys. They weren't in the drawer. Likely Willie had played with them sometime and not put them back.

Molly sighed and tried to tell herself that it didn't really matter. There was no use looking further. The keys might be anywhere in the old house, and of course there was no need for them anyhow.

It was then that she heard the pup yelp again, and for a moment she stiffened with a sudden stab of fear. She heard the pup come whimpering to the back porch and throw himself against the step. Suddenly anger wiped away the fear.

Nobody but Bill Morgan would kick the pup, and she was not afraid of Bill. Contemptible as he was in most ways, she didn't believe he would try physical violence.

Chin up, she opened the back door. The pup crawled over her feet, whimpering softly. Molly bent and patted his head.

There was only the light of stars to see by, but as soon as her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness the girl could see that the yard was completely quiet.

"Bill!" she called sharply. "Bill Morgan, are you still out here?"

There was no answer, and after a moment she turned back inside again. Now the uneasy feeling hit her almost like a blow. A vague fear that made no sense—and then suddenly did. If Bill had come back he had come to get Willie!

MOLLY picked up the lamp and went up the stairs, past two open dark bedroom doors to the boy's room.

The boy was lying on his back, his eyes wide open. "Gee, Molly," he whispered. "I'm glad you came up. I'm scared."

Molly set the lamp on the table near the bed. The boy looked so little and wide eyed and helpless, that a sudden wave of warm affection and pity touched her heart. She smiled at him and bent to rough his brown hair.

"Don't be afraid, honey. I'm here and I'll stay until you go to sleep."

He reached up, caught her hand, and held it tight. "Molly, I heard my pup yelp. And I thought I heard the stairs creak before you came up."

Molly sat on the edge of the bed and tried to keep her smile steady and reassuring. "Don't be afraid," she said softly again. "You must have—"

"No need to be afraid, son," said a smooth voice from the dark doorway. "I don't aim to hurt either of you—if you do what I say."

Molly turned her head slowly.

"Dad!" Willie's voice was a startled yelp.

"Get up and get your clothes on, son. You're going with me now—tonight!"

"No!" said Molly.

Willie hunched himself up on one elbow. "I think I'd better stay with Molly, Dad. She's been pretty good to me—and she kind of needs me to look after her."

Molly turned to give him a brief smile. "Thanks, honey."

She looked at Bill Morgan again, noting a length of soft rope that was hanging over his arm. "You're being foolish, Bill. You should have known I was bluffing tonight. I'll give you anything you want—except Willie."

"I've decided to play it different, baby. Now you be nice, and you won't get hurt. I'm just going to tie you up so you won't make me any trouble for a few hours."

"But Bill, please—"

"Molly, do what he says. I don't mind going with him—and someday—"

"No!" said Molly. She stood up and faced Bill Morgan defiantly. Chills of fear raced up and down her spine at the look in his eyes. She was no longer at all sure that Bill wouldn't try physical violence.

He reached for one of her hands and she slapped hard at his wrist. Suddenly his other fist came up and caught her on the point of the chin. She went down, her head striking a corner of the table. Dimly she heard Willie scream, then she felt the ropes being wound tight around her ankles and wrists. Willie was crying and Bill Morgan's voice was telling him to get dressed and to pack enough clothes to last for a couple of weeks.

Bill lifted her into a rocking chair and tied her there. There was a sharp, stinging ache in her head, and something warm and wet was running down the side of her face, into the frothy white collar of her dress. Willie was still crying, sitting on the edge of the bed like he was half dazed. Bill cuffed him.

"Better put your clothes on, honey," Molly said.

Me looked at her. "You're you're—"

"I'm all right," Molly assured him. "You'd better do what your father says now, Willie."

He got up slowly and reached for the clothes he had left in a tumbled heap at the foot of the bed.

Suddenly Molly stiffened, sure that she had heard the stairs creak. Bill Morgan had heard it too. He whirled, his gun came up.

"Wait, Bill," Molly said softly. Then she raised her voice. "Uncle Nat?"

There was no answer. "Everything's all right, Uncle Nat. Did you get your corn plasters?"

THERE was still no answer, only the faint creak of another stairstep. Gun up, Bill Morgan moved silently through the connecting door into the next bedroom. In the mood he was in, he would kill anyone.

"Uncle Nat, everything's all right. I tell you!" Molly's voice had a touch of panic.

"Yes, ma'am," the voice that answered was warm and deep and resonant, not at all like Uncle Nat's rusty wheeze. "But if it's like you say, you and Bill Morgan come on downstairs and we'll talk it over."

Molly sucked in a sharp breath, then called out firmly, "I wish you'd go away, Randy Maybank! This is none of your business! You've no right in this house!" Try as she would, there was a telltale quaver in her voice.

After that there was no answer for a long minute. Then Randy Maybank came into the room, Bill Morgan behind him with a gun.

Tears started running down Molly's white cheeks. "Oh, Randy!" she said miserably, "Why did you come back?"

Randy smiled at her. "I started to come back sooner, but this coyote got the jump on me, knocked me out, and left me tied up be-

hind the corrals. It took me till now to work loose."

Bill Morgan broke in in that deceptively gentle voice of his, "Billy, have you got any more rope stuck around here anywhere?"

Willie seemed to have gotten over his scare. He shrugged. "I guess so. You aren't going to hurt Mr. Maybank, are you?"

"We're going to take him with us, Billy."

"I'll give you anything you want, Bill," Molly protested. "And I'll never say a word."

"I don't trust you, Molly. If you'd been reasonable, I'd have been satisfied with Amy's share of the ranch. But since you weren't I'm taking Billy and your cowboy friend to a nice hideout I know below the Border. The day I get twenty thousand—cash—I'll let Maybank start walking."

"And Willie?"

"He can take his choice—stay with me or come back."

Molly ran her tongue over dry lips. Willie had gone to a chest of drawers and was fumbling through some clothing. Molly's eyes followed him and suddenly a new hope—a faint, wild hope—caught at her heart. She turned to Bill Morgan. She must hold his attention.

"You give me your word you won't hurt him or Randy?"

"Sure," Bill said.

"Why, Bill?" Molly asked, to bring his attention back to her. "You're being so stupid. You had it all your way. Now you're breaking the law. You broke into this house, you hit me, you're kidnapping Willie and Randy Maybank, and you didn't need to do any of it."

Bill Morgan hesitated, then suddenly laughed. "All right, sugar, I'll tell you. It was because I couldn't risk proving my claim in court. I had a wife already when I married Amy. Finding it out was what made her leave."

Molly drew in a deep, shocked breath. "You really are a stinker, Bill!"

Willie turned away from the dresser. "I thought there was some rope in here, but there isn't." He had his big old water pistol in his hand instead. "But I got some somewhere."

He took a couple of steps toward the middle of the room and suddenly the gun came up. "Stick 'em up, pop!" he cried shrilly. "I'm not going with you. You kicked my pup and you hit Molly. I don't like you."

BILL MORGAN laughed. "We aren't playing cops and robbers, son." His voice had an edge to it. "You don't think I'm scared of a water pistol, do you?"

"You'd better be," said Willie. "Jump, Mr. Maybank!"

Willie squeezed the trigger. Randy Maybank jumped sideways. Bill Morgan's bullet cut through the coyboy's clothes, and the same second a sluice of ink struck Morgan dead center in the eyes. He threw up a hand to claw at the blinding, black mess. The next instant Randy Maybank's fist slammed into his jaw. Bill Morgan went down.

"I'm afraid your rug is ruined, ma'am."

Molly gave a little laugh, half relief, half hysteria. "The rug isn't worth twenty thousand dollars—or your life and Willie's, Mr. Maybank."

"Randy," said Randy Maybank.

"And don't call me Willie," said Willie.

"I won't any more," Molly said. "Your name is William David—David after my father. How will it be if I call you Dave?"

"Fine," said the boy.

Molly's eyes met Randy Maybank's.

"Randy, maybe I'm crazy, but I want to give Bill a fair head start toward that hideout below the border before I call the sheriff. He's—he's Wil—Dave's father. I don't want him in jail. Somehow I don't think he'll ever be back to bother us again."

The look in Randy Maybank's eyes was warm and gentle and approving. He stooped and helped the boy untie her ankles, then lifted the girl to her feet.

"I'd sort of like permission to stick around close, Molly, and see that he doesn't."

Maybe it wasn't very ardent love talk, but Molly was used to tongue-tied cowboys.

She smiled with utter happiness and content. "Permission granted," she said, and now her voice was soft and gentle and sweet, the way it was meant to be.

# OUT OF THE CHUTES

ALL THE TALK that's been going on about a Hall of Fame for rodeo, like the one for baseball, has turned into action. In fact, the idea has not only been definitely planned, it has also been expanded.

Instead of a Rodeo Hall of Fame, it's going to be a Cowboy Hall of Fame—thus making room for heroes of the range in the Old West as well as heroes of the arena.

Twenty-five prominent Westerners, businessmen, ranchers and rodeo producers representing thirteen Western states, met in Denver recently to launch the Cowboy Hall of Fame, Inc.

Readers of this column may remember a piece about the Lee Company, makers of cowboy clothing, in which we mentioned the company's strong support of rodeo. The hall of fame idea has been a pet project of President C. A. Reynolds for many years. It was he who originated the idea and did all the work of interesting other prominent Westerners in it. And now that his efforts have been successful in getting the project started, Mr. Reynolds's job is just beginning. He is going to serve as chairman of the board of trustees, and will be able to give even more time to this important venture soon, since he plans to retire from the Lee Company in June. He'll be one retired businessman who has no time on his hands, for there is much to be done and many decisions to be made before the Hall of Fame can be established.

First and foremost, a site must be selected. Naturally the bidding is spirited among more than a dozen Western cities and towns for the honor, and all of them have advanced compelling reasons why they should be chosen.

At the moment, a committee is paring this list down to five chief contenders, and the full board of trustees will choose among these any day now.

And then there's the major problem of finances. Probably money for the original building will be raised by public subscription, with the expectation that admission charges and sale of mementoes would make it pay its own way later. Even if, in the beginning, the structure had to be fairly modest, it could be added to later. The trustees want the Cowboy Hall of Fame to become, some day, one of the biggest and most interesting museums in the whole country.

The trustees are also considering methods of electing the heroes of the West to the Hall of Fame. In baseball's Hall of Fame, names are added by newspaper sports writers—a good system for baseball but not for rodeo since (alas!) rodeo is seldom covered on the sports pages.

Whatever method is used, though, it's probable that a fairly large number of early Western pioneers and rodeo figures will be chosen for honors to begin with, and then gradually, over the years, the names of more recently prominent figures will be added.

The trustees feel they must go slowly, making their decisions carefully, if they are to make the Cowboy Hall of Fame a really important tribute to the West.

We're in favor of the trustees' decision to honor not only rodeo figures but other cowboy figures as well. It's high time special honor was given to the men who "tamed a wilderness and filled it with cattle that feed the world. The memorial and museum will keep alive the drama, spirit and romance of one of the most colorful, turbulent and productive eras in the history of the world."

That quote is part of the prospectus for the Cowboy Hall of Fame. Our best wish for its sponsors is that they succeed in their fine intentions.

*Adios,*

THE EDITORS

# The Fighting Texan

*By Will Cook*

*Quartermain, watching the yard, knew he was in a bad spot*

**THE STORY SO FAR:** JIM QUARTERMAIN takes over half the Beal ranch when his foster-father is killed in a quarrel with the JENNERS. JANE BEAL gets the other half of the ranch, comes there to live, and tries to win back Jim, who used to love her. Jim and CARRIE HOLDERMAN, who loves him, talk peace to the Jenners, but are frustrated when CIMARRON, a Beal hand, kills FORNEY JENNER. Jim forces Cimarron to admit he is taking orders from banker HORACE PENDERGAST, who is fomenting trouble so he can take over both ranches. Jane Beal, secretly working with Pendergast, forces Carrie to leave the ranch. Pendergast meanwhile schemes to have ROB JENNER killed by KURT HARLOW and AUDIE THE KID, in such a way that the blame will fall on Quartermain. . . .

**CONCLUSION**

THE buggy ride had reduced Carrie Holderman's clothes to a sodden ruin, and she sent the hotel clerk for three pails of hot water and a wooden tub. After these arrived she bolted the door, stripped off her wet clothes, and lounged in the water for almost an hour. The rain pelted the window, distorting even the light that seeped into the drab room.

Finally she got out and toweled herself

dry, before slipping into her faded robe. Alone now, she could admit to herself that she loved Jim Quartermain and would probably never stop loving him. He was what she wanted. But she had pride and, if he wanted her, he would have to come after her. She wondered if her pride would allow her to accept him if he did?

Two people, she knew, could hurt each other and forgive each other, but then the hurting gets out of hand and goes beyond the realm of forgiveness. Carrie wondered if they had gone too far, accused each other too bitterly for either to forget.

"I'm a coward," she said to the four walls. "I wasn't woman enough to fight Jane Beal," she added softly, and her shame was deep.

There was a small stove in the room, and she built a fire to drive out the damp chill. A few hours ago she had been roasting; a few hours ago she had been happy, secure in the knowledge that she was offering Jim Quartermain a solution to his troubles.

"I never offered him enough," she said aloud. "I wanted him to be what I wanted, but I never gave him anything."

She sniffed and decided that she was coming down with a cold.

"Just what I need now," she said, and searched for her purse. She saw it on the bed and picked it up, frowning. This wasn't her purse! Then she remembered that she had told Jim Quartermain to find her handbag, and he must have picked up the wrong one by accident. She had Jane Beal's handbag.

On a sudden impulse, she opened it and dumped the contents on the hotel bed. She saw the packet of letters and pushed them away but, in doing so, turned them over and saw the address in Jane's neat hand.

At Horace Pendergast's name her attention sharpened, and she ripped the string binding the letters. She read one carefully, then hurriedly spread them out and sorted them as to dates. For an hour she read, occasionally swearing mildly in a soft voice.

When she finished, she bundled them up again and wrapped them carefully, before starting to dressing. She was forced to slip into the cold, damp jeans and flannel shirt. There was a raincape in the bottom of her bag and she tore into it, scattering dresses and petticoats on the bed in her great haste.

Dressed and with the letters tucked next to her stomach beneath the shirt, she went downstairs and to the stable at the end of the street. The hosler was alseep in a chair.

Carrie shook him. "I want a horse that can run, mister."

The hostler stood up and looked her over. "Got a stud back there, but I doubt you can ride him."

"If he has hair and four legs," Carrie said, "I'll ride him. Put a saddle on him."

She walked back and forth in the open maw then mounted when the hostler led the calico stud out. Tucking the raincape beneath her legs, she left town at a dead run.

"Now you're going to do another foolish thing," she said to herself.

Quartermain might thank her for presenting him with the evidence that would expose Jane Beal as a traitor who stood by while her father and brother were killed, but Quartermain would never love her for this.

A parting gift, she thought, but for me, not for him. "I'm a very small person," she admitted to herself. "I can't stand to lose. This way I'll go away smug and happy knowing I've beaten her—but I'll have given Jim nothing but pain."

She tucked her head down and bent over the horse's neck, letting him run.

KURT HARLOW did not like to ride in the rain, but Rob Jenner did not seem to notice it at all. Harlow rode on Jenner's right side and Audie the Kid brought up the rear, a length behind. No one wanted to talk and the rain made a steady drumming against the earth. Water began to run through minute depressions crossing the flats.

Rain softened the felt of Jenner's old hat and poured from the brim to soak his face and beard. Occasionally he would raise his hand to wipe the water from his face, but other than that he paid no attention to it.

When he was near Quartermain's fence he turned to Harlow and said, "Man, I've a question or two that need answering."

"I'm not paid to know the answers," Harlow said.

His face was healing, and some semblance of his old handsomeness was returning. He

shifted around in the saddle and looked back at Audie the Kid, then turned back, saying nothing more.

"It's nagging my mind," Jenner said, "just how Pendergast knew that Quartermain's woman was here this morning."

"What difference does it make?" Harlow asked. "She's like Quartermain, a sneak when she wants to be."

"She never struck me like that," Jenner said. "No, the girl was telling the truth, by golly."

"What's that?" Harlow asked. Audie the Kid came in close on the other side and rode even with the old man.

"That Pendergast is a crook!" Jenner said in his braying voice. "Carrie thought that Beal woman was working with Pendergast, and by golly it stands up. The Beal girl knew Carrie come to me this morning. When she went to town she told Pendergast, and he came right out to see me."

Rob Jenner suddenly pulled his horse to a stop, making the other two half turn to face him.

"What's got into you?" Harlow wanted to know. "You backing out?"

"No," Jenner said, "but I've come far enough with you two. Go on back. I'll see Quartermain by myself."

"Stubborn old coot, isn't he?" Audie asked. He leaned his crossed hands on the saddle-horn and waited.

"Don't get balky," Harlow advised. "The boss doesn't like it and neither do I."

Jenner shifted the reins and raised his hand to unbutton his slicker.

"I'm wondering now what your orders were —to kill me, or to kill Jim Quartermain."

"He's smart, isn't he?" Audie the Kid said, and ripped the snaps from his slicker. Jenner tried to get his hand inside the folds to where his gun lay, but Audie the Kid drew and fired from the hip.

The noise caused Jenner's horse to rear. When he fell from the saddle the two others edged closer to look at the man in the mud. Harlow had his gun pointed at Jenner, but Audie the Kid said, "Put it away. I don't get paid to miss."

From across the flats someone shouted, and Harlow flipped his head toward Quartermain's fence line. The guard there was peering through the rain.

Harlow said, "Let's go back and tell our story to Parker and Bushrod. Those fellers of Quartermain's killed the old man as we approached the fence."

"They sure did," Audie the Kid said, and turned his horse as Quartermain's crew mounted and began to ride toward them.

There was no chance of pursuit, and Harlow knew. He was not worried about Quartermain's men recognizing them; when he came back he would have nine armed men behind him, and it wouldn't matter who killed who.

Cord Butram was the first man to reach Jenner. He shouted to the men still coming up. The rain was heavy now and the wind whipped it across the grasslands, beating it against the earth.

AUDIE THE KID and Harlow rode fast and soon dashed into the Long Knife yard, flinging off by the porch. Parker had heard them ride in and was on the porch to meet them.

"Where's Pa?"

Harlow looked hearbroken. He removed his hat before speaking. "We were approaching Quartermain's fence when his crew turned loose on us. The old man caught a slug and went down. We couldn't pick him up, even, the lead was whistling so bad."

Parker began to swear, a running stream of profanity that went on for a minute without repeating itself. Tears were in his eyes when he wheeled toward the door and bellowed for his brother.

""Get Shallak and the crew together," he snapped. "Quartermain has killed the last Jenner he's ever going to kill. We're riding in five minutes!"

Harlow and Audie the Kid grinned and ran toward the bunkhouse for their rifles. Horace Pendergast was still in the house. He came out to stand on the porch, and put his hand on Parker Jenner's shoulder.

"Son, let me tell you how sorry I am to hear this. Somehow I feel that I have brought this upon you."

"It isn't your fault," Parker said. "You did all you could to keep the peace with that

killer. I'll get him the same way I got McKitrich. I'm not afraid of gunfighters; I'm as fast as he is—faster, maybe."

"Of course you are," Pendergast said. "You are faster. I saw Quartermain kill that man in town. He used a trick, got the man talking and took him off guard."

"He won't trick me," Parker said, and left the porch when his brother and Audie came up with the horses. The crew assembled and he mounted.

"Be dark in another hour," Pendergast said. It would be safer to wait."

"I'm waiting for nothing," Parker said, and wheeled his horse and stormed out of the muddy yard, his crew strung out behind him.

Pendergast watched them leave, a pleased man who could puff his cigar in content while other men fought and died for him. He had, at that moment, the almost overpowering urge to get paper and pencil and figure up the profits.

To pass the time, he added dead men in his mind. There were Rob, Forney, and probably either Parker or Bushrod before this night's business was through. In the event that the gods did not provide, Audie the Kid and Harlow would take care of it on the ride home. They had Shallak and Davis along to take care of what crew would remain.

On Quartermain's side of the ledger, there was Purvis gone, and Joel McKitrich, who would have tipped the odds had he come in earlier. Jim Quartermain would be dead by morning, and the Running W crew would be scattered.

Horace Dobbs Pendergast would be left holding a very rich prize. There would be a token payment to Harlow and the others, then the raking in of profits. Pendergast smiled and spun his cigar into a mud puddle.

From the direction of town a buggy made a moving dark spot against the gray curtain of rain. His attention sharpened, tapering off to relief when he recognized Jane Beal. The girl pulled into the yard and dismounted by the porch.

She looked around at the vacant ranch buildings and said, "Horace, I can't go through with it!"

"You're too late," he said. "Parker and the crew are riding on Jim Quartermain right now. By nightfall it will be all over."

"I don't want that," she said. "Horace, I'm sorry, but I've changed my mind."

"This is funny," he said, but the light in his eyes said that he did not think it humorous at all. "You rotten-minded little tramp! Who do you think you are, telling me that you've changed your mind?"

JANE recoiled a step from this man she had never seen before. Ruthless as he had been, Pendergast had always been suave. Now he was like a money-hungry gambler, ready to kill with his bare hands to get what he wanted.

"All right, I'm rotten," Jane said. "I'm evil and no good and anything else you want to call me, but I can't stand to lose him, Horace. I love him!"

He laughed, his head tipped back, both hands pressing his fat stomach. Through the drumming rain his mirth pealed. The sound of it frightened her and she retreated off the porch.

Pendergast followed her then and Jane dashed around the buggy to keep away from him. "You fool," Pendergast said, "do you think I'd share anything with you? I'd have to sleep with one eye open to keep you from robbing me blind."

"No," Jane said frantically. "Please, I just want you to stop this."

When Pendergast began to stalk her, Jane seized the buggy whip and lashed him across the face with it, leaving a bright red welt. Pendergast cursed and tried to grab her, but she ran around in front of the horses and into the house, slamming the front door as he mounted the porch in pursuit.

She ran into the parlor, frantically searching for a weapon, because she realized that he meant to kill her. There was nothing in the parlor except the empty pegs over the mantle where Bushrod kept his rifle. She heard Pendergast leave the front porch and run around the house.

Dashing into the hall, she opened a door and saw Rob Jenner's .50-110 Sharps in the corner. Snatching it up, she opened the breechblock and saw that there was a cartridge in it. She ran into the hall.

Pendergast was standing in the doorway that led to the kitchen. In his hand was a double-bladed ax. He took a step into the hall and Jane pointed the rifle at him, earing the hammer back.

"You evil man," she said. "I'll kill you if you come closer. I mean it!"

"So *I'm* evil? What are you, a nice girl with high morals and lofty ideals?" He ran his hand along the handle of the ax to secure a better grip.

"Please," Jane said, "don't come any closer. I don't want to shoot, honestly I don't."

Pendergast smiled and had begun to whip the ax in an arc when she fired. The bullet passed through his heavy body and slammed him into the wall with enough force to crack the plaster. Pendergast fell loosely, a look of complete disbelief on his fat face. Jane released the Sharps and let it fall. Rain continued to batter the roof, a steady sound that filled the empty house. She stared at Pendergast, who in death was just a fat man resting in an awkward position.

Turning, she went out the front door and got into her buggy. I won't be in time, she thought, but I want to try. She made a sharp U turn and drove from the yard, letting the horses have their heads.

CARRIE HOLDERMAN arrived at the Running W ranch house five minutes before Long Knife descended in howling fury. They struck the north edge of the yard, killed a man who tried to run from the barn to the bunkhouse, fired a dozen shots into the house, then took cover in the cottonwood trees.

Quartermain was in the parlor with Carrie, trying to get a hot drink down her to stop the chattering of her teeth. The Long Knife crew were in the trees before Quartermain could fire a shot. He approached a window cautiously and looked into the yard. The dead man lay by the barn, but there was no one else in sight. Cherokee and the remains of the crew were in the bunkhouse, but they might as well have been miles away. The Long Knife crew closed off the yard.

Quartermain and Carrie Holderman were alone in the house. He went into the kitchen to bolt the door and to upend the table against it. Then he killed the fire in the stove and moved this against the table, making a solid bulkhead against anyone who tried to break it down.

The fire in the parlor was going strong and he doused it with a bucket of water. Carrie was huddled down against the wall, her shirt and jeans soaking wet. Quartermain went into his room and came out with a shirt and a pair of pants, then turned his back while she stripped to the skin, dried herself and dressed. There was no shooting now, just the monotonous rattle of rain.

He said, "Harlow's an Indian. He'll wait until it gets good and dark."

"There's the crew at the fence," she said. "They'll come as soon as they hear the shooting."

"Too far away to hear in the rain," he said. "Besides, they're probably dead. Parker'd hit them before he came on in, just to keep them from coming up later.

Someone opened the bunkhouse door, peeked around the corner, then whipped around as a rifle cracked. When the echo died, the man lay in the muddy yard and did not move.

Quartermain, watching this, knew that he was in a bad spot. From the cottonwood trees, Long Knife was covering the entire span of the front yard. There was no way to get out of the house and circle them. Circle them with what? he asked himself. His men were pinned down in the bunkhouse. Any time now, someone would get the idea of throwing a rifle bullet through the thin bunkhouse wall and either killing the crew sight unseen or driving them out where the shooting would be better.

He touched a match to a cigar and set his rifle against the window sill. Glancing at Carrie, he asked, "Why did you come back, Carrie?"

"Don't you know?"

"Not any more I don't," he said.

He leaned his shoulder against the wall and watched her. The rain had plastered her hair tightly to her skull and the braids were sodden ropes that she rolled between the folds of a towel.

"I guess I was always a little afraid of

your world, Carrie, a world full of gentle people. Afraid I wouldn't fit." He laughed softly. "I was like the little boy who's afraid to talk for fear he'll swear, then speaks one word and finds out that he's shocked everybody. There's no place for a gun in your world, Carrie, but because I am who I am, there is no place in mine without one."

"We were going to make a place together," she said, "where there was no need. Weren't we? What happened, Jim? Where did that dream go?"

"It just went," he said. "Blame it on Jane if it's make you feel better. Blame it on me."

"That's no good," she said. "If the dream had been real enough nothing would have happened to it."

SHOTS tore through the silence. Inside the bunkhouse a man yelled, then quiet was like a cape thrown over the yard. Quartermain reared up to look, then settled back.

"I keep thinking of McKitrich," he said. "how lost he was near the end—tired and confused and lost, and trying hard to hang onto something that never existed for him."

"Like you think it doesn't exist for you?"

He raised his eyes to her. "Why, yes, I guess that's it. It wouldn't last for us, Carrie. A few years, maybe, then I'd go out like McKitrich did, trying to hang onto a shadow."

"I'm not like McKitrich's wife," Carrie said.

Someone yelled from the cottonwood grove. When Quartermain did not answer, the shout came again. "Hey, gunfighter, you coming out?" It was Kurt Harlow's voice and there was pleasure in it, a gloating triumph that he no longer bothered to conceal. Darkness was not far off now and there was no slack in the rain.

Carrie Holderman tucked her hands inside the too-large sleeves of his shirt and said, "Too bad we can't have a fire."

Someone left the shelter of the cottonwood trees, but he did not take two steps before a fusillade from the bunkhouse cut him down. This was followed by a wicked fire from the Long Knife crew which drove the men in the bunkhouse into a panic. One tried to bolt from the door and was shot through the leg, but managed to crawl around the corner of the building to safety.

Quartermain watched this from the window and his interest picked up. If the downed man were not too badly wounded and if he used his head, he could break this loggerhead. Harlow must have realized this also, for he sent two men to circle the house in the rear. Quartermain ran through the hallway and into the kitchen to cut them off.

He knocked the pane of glass from the back window with a circular motion of the rifle barrel, and shot as the first man tried to make the woodshed. The bullet tagged the man and he went end over end as he fell. The other man snapped a shot at Quartermain that stripped wood from the window frame, then ducked behind the corner of the house, causing Quartermain to miss.

There were no further attempts to break free of the cottonwoods. Harlow had pinned down Quartermain's men, but his own men were pinned down too.

The house was beginning to get dark and Quartermain went back to the parlor. He sat down beside Carrie and said, "Won't you tell me why you came back?"

"No," she said. "I intended to tell you, but I've changed my mind. I don't want you to hate me, Jim."

"I'd never do that, Carrie."

"Yes," she said, "you would if I did this thing."

Harlow was yelling again. "Quartermain! What about a talk?"

Quartermain threw the front window open. "Talk about what?"

"I got you on the hip!"

"Let's see you do something about it," Quartermain yelled back.

Suddenly a gun opened up from the back corner of the bunkhouse, and Quartermain knew that the wounded man had dragged himself completely around the building and was now pelting Long Knife obliquely. Harlow's crew ducked to the other side of the trees to get away from this fire, but in doing so exposed themselves to Quartermain's rifle. He sighted quickly, dropped one man, then watched complete confusion grip the crew.

The men in the bunkhouse had taken advantage of this, and three men boiled out, making the corner in safety. Harlow's cursing was like a whip, for now the fight had turned and the field was no longer dominated by Long Knife.

The loggerhead had been broken and Running W was deploying to carry on the fight. Shallak and Davis left the cover of the trees as the last light faded. Quartermain tried to head them off by shooting out the back window, but both men made the rear porch.

WITH this advantage, they kept him to the front of the house while Harlow and Parker Jenner made another rush across the yard. Guns popped raggedly now, the flashes bright against the sooty night. Shallak and Davis began to batter at the back door while two of Jenner's crew tried to gain the front porch. But they were driven back by Jim Quartermain.

There was no sign of the Running W crew, but there was someone left in the bunkhouse, for a gun spoke from there, holding the yard at bay. At the back of the house, Davis tried to get through the window, a mistake that cost him his life. Shallak, warned by Quartermain's shot, lay down against the base of the wall and listened to the others fight.

Using the darkness as cover, Parker and Bushrod succeeded in getting into the bunkhouse. There was a flurry of shooting, and then a sudden fire broke out as someone kicked over the stove, scattering hot coals on the dry floor.

"Time to get out of here," Quartermain said, and pulled Carrie to her feet.

He edged into the dark hall and opened the front door. There was some spasmodic shooting near the barn, but it seemed to have little effect either way.

The bunkhouse was burning brightly now, the flames shooting long fingers into the raining night. Someone ran across the muddy yard, slipping and falling twice, then carried away a pitchfork full of flaming hay. Quartermain threw his rifle to his shoulder to drop the man, then realized that he could not afford to draw fire with Carrie by his side. The man went into the barn and the flames caught immediately. The horses were turned loose and stampeded with rapid shooting. Then Harlow began to shout in a bull voice, and the gunfire died off.

"Quartermain, can you hear me?"

For a heartbeat Quartermain wondered if this were a trick to get him to reveal his position. But when he heard the back door splinter, he knew that it wasn't. "On the porch! There's a woman here."

"All right," Harlow yelled. He revealed himself then in the light of the burning bunkhouse and barn. He held Cherokee Nye prisoner. "I'll let the girl go," he promised, "but you have to throw down your gun."

"Don't do it," Carrie said. "Jim, there's some way out of this."

"I won't wait!" Harlow yelled. "Give up or we'll put the fire to the old man."

"He's not fooling," Quartermain said. "All right! What about my crew?"

"We want you. They can go when you show yourself."

RANCH FLICKER TALK

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The barn was beginning to collapse in a shower of sparks, and men dashed back and forth in the muddy yard. Someone along the perimeter yelled and a buggy came on a run, sliding to a stop fifteen yards from the porch.

"I might have known it," Carrie said, as Jane Beal got down and ran toward the house.

"Somebody stop her!" Parker Jenner yelled. Then, as a man raised his rifle, "Not that way, you fool!"

Long Knife was rounding up the remainder of Quartermain's crew, herding them into a huddle and relieving them of their guns. Jane came on the porch, saw Quartermain in the blackest shadows, and threw her arms around his neck, crying uncontrollably.

Carrie aisd, "That's the first honest emotion I've ever seen you display."

Jane jumped away from Jim Quartermain and whirled toward Carrie. "What are you doing here? I left you in town."

"I'm not a dog who's trained to stay put," Carrie said.

"Quartermain," Harlow yelled again, "you haven't a chance. Give up!"

Inside the house, Davis had succeeded in firing the kitchen; the glow of the mounting blaze came through the hall and front windows. Quartermain threw his rifle in the mud and stepped from the porch.

Jane yelled, "No, Jim! They'll kill you!"

Carrie scrambled off the porch and, unnoticed, retrieved the rifle, wiping the mud off it on her shirt sleeves.

She held it and waited when Quartermain stopped twenty feet away. Harlow and Parker Jenner came forward, with Cherokee Nye between them.

Harlow yelled, "Let the others go! We got our pigeons!"

QUARTERMAIN brushed his holstered Remington around to the back of his hip and hoped that in the darkness the firelight would not glint off the cartridges in the belt loops. He watched Kurt Harlow and waited, for he knew his man. As soon as there was no more danger, Harlow would kill him without regret.

Audie the Kid came up then, a grin twisting his face. He spoke to Harlow. "Shallak's dead. So are three others."

"Who cares?" Harlow said, and turned his head to watch Jim Quartermain's crew gather ropes to hunt down horses. The three men stood in a row facing Quartermain, with Cherokee, disarmed, between them. Harlow said, "Jim, this is something I've wanted for a long time."

"Now the waiting's over," Quartermain said, and flipped his head around when Bushrod Jenner yelled loudly. He appeared suddenly in the fringe of light thrown by the burning barn. A vague group of men were behind him.

The Long Knife crew, instead of opening fire on them, gathered around, laughing and creating a commotion as they came on at a slow walk. "What the hell?" Harlow said. Parker left at a trot, his boots splashing mud.

Three of the men were mounted. Quartermain recognized his crew that had been at the fence, but he could not account for their being alive. As they drew nearer he saw that they were dragging a travois.

Suddenly Rob Jenner's voice split the night. He shouted, "Get those two!" His finger pointed toward Harlow and Audie the Kid.

The Kid's nerve broke and he tried to make a run for it, but Parker and Bushrod shot together. The night was cross-laced with gunfire. Then Audie the Kid was down, still trying to fire his gun.

Quartermain had not taken his eyes off Kurt Harlow; he would have been dead if he had. Harlow, at the old man's accusing finger, swept back his coat and drew on Quartermain. Jim Quartermain's doctored Remington came up level with Harlow's. They shot together but, in drawing, Quartermain had turned sideways, and Harlow's bullet barely brushed him.

Harlow staggered, then planted his feet wide in the mud. A look of surprise came over his face before he pitched forward, splashing mire over Quartermain's boots. The remainder of Quartermain's crew went after Davis, who had come boldly to the front porch, expecting Harlow to have everything in hand.

Quartermain walked over to where Rob Jenner lay on the travois and said, "What is this, Rob?"

Jenner looked past Quartermain toward the ranch house. Flames licked from the roof along the back, and the rear porch gave way. Jane Beal was coming across the yard, with Carrie right behind her, still carrying the rifle.

Jenner said, "Harlow and the Kid tried to kill me and blame it on you. Seems they managed to convince my boys you did it." He smiled. "I was trying to get my gun out when the bullet broke my arm." He stopped talking when Jane Beal came up to stand beside Jim Quartermain. Rob Jenner asked, "What kind of a woman are you to betray your own people?"

"What's this old fool talking about?" Jane asked.

"He's talking about you," Carrie said. "He wants to know how you could love money so much that you'd join Pendergast in a scheme to grab all this for yourself."

"Damn you," Jane said, and tried to hit Carrie, but Quartermain blocked her and pushed her aside.

"Be careful now," he said, catching her wrist. "What proof have you of this, Rob?"

"Proof?" He wrinkled his brows. "Pendergast came to me with a story of how you'd made a fool of me—you and her." He looked at Carrie. "Told me that Carrie lied to me this morning. Like a fool, I believed him. He sent Harlow and the Kid with me to talk or make war with you, only there wasn't going to be any talk because they had orders to kill me. I got to thinking and I finally remembered some supposings that me'n Carrie were doing this morning. We supposed that maybe Jane was in with Pendergast. Now I didn't rightly see how this could be, but then Pendergast knew that Carrie'd been to see me this morning. He couldn't have known that unless Jane Beal told him, could he?"

PARKER and Bushrod waited, their faces dark and as stubborn as their father's. The Running W crew was gathered around now, a close-packed circle. Some one

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had tried to organize a fire fighting crew, but the house was dry and fire-gutted from within, so they had given it up.

Turning to Jane, Quartermain said, "All right, Jane. What have you got to say?"

"Are you going to believe him?" She sounded insulted.

"I asked you a question, and I want an answer right now."

"Jim," she said, "how can you think such a thing?" She saw no give in his face and added, "All right, I did mention it to Pendergast this noon. I was angry and he saw that, so I said that Carrie had gone to see Rob and that we'd had a tiff over it. I told him that she was leaving the Running W." She looked around at the silent, wet faces, then shouted, "What are you staring at? Can I help it if a schemer turns simple conversation into something terrible?"

One of Quartermain's riders spoke up. "Something funny here, boss. We found Rob as soon as he'd been hit; he wasn't more'n a quarter mile away. We carted him way down to the other end where cookie had his wagon. Man ought to have shelter when he's hurt. Anyway, he patched him the best we could, and I sent Britches over to Long Knife with the word.

"There was nobody there except Pendergast, and he was dead. Someone'd puckered him with Rob's buffalo gun. Britches took a look around and saw some buggy tracks. The rain'd pretty well messed 'em up, but he claims that rig over there made 'em." He pointed to Jane Beal's buggy.

The eyes again focused on her, and she wrung her hands. "Yes, I was there too. Jim, you don't believe them, do you?" She wiped the rain from her face. "I got the idea from Carrie, making peace instead of more killing, so I stopped there on my way home. Pendergast was there and he acted like a crazy man. When he came at me with an ax, I ran into the house, found Rob's gun, and—and shot him." She looked at each of them appealingly.

Carrie's voice was softly sarcastic. "You poor thing; you're trembling."

Jane's temper got the best of her. "Do I have to stand here and take sass from her?"

Quartermain's face was grave. Watching him, Carrie Holderman knew that he was weighing the evidence, but his verdict was swaying toward Jane Beal.

Finally he said, "Rob, I don't think we have anything conclusive."

"Of course he hasn't!" Jane snapped. "He's just a hating old man who'll go on hating until someone shoots him."

Carrie touched Jane Beal on the arm and said, "Are you sure you and Mr. Pendergast never corresponded while you were back East?"

Surprise came into Jane's eyes, but the night hid it from all but Carrie. "This is ridiculous," she said. "Mr. Pendergast was a friend of my father's, nothing more."

Looking at Jim Quartermain, Carrie said, "Jim, you asked me twice why I came back here and I wouldn't tell you. But now I will. When I was packing I asked you to get me my handbag, but you were confused and gave me Jane's."

She unbuttoned her shirt and pulled out the letters. "She has written to Pendergast, Jim, many times. All of these letters will show that she and Pendergast were in this together, all the way, even to the point where she knew her own brother and father were going to be killed."

JANE made a grab for the letters in Quartermain's hand, but he fended her away. He could not read them in the dark, but Carrie's voice carried the truth in it and he had no doubts now, no memories to sway his judgment.

"Give me my letters," Jane said, trying to reach around Quartermain. "Jim, I'm asking you to give them back, and to believe in me as I've always believed in you."

The men standing around were passing silent judgment and it bothered her. She had no support, no one who even cared to listen to her plea.

"Jim, I love you; that wasn't a lie." She pressed her hands together. "I'm everything they say, but never in that. That's why I went to Pendergast, Jim, to beg him not to have you killed. I wanted you above everything else. Don't you believe that?"

"No," he said simply, and let it go at that. He could upbraid her, accuse her of taking

his heart for her own purposes when she never had a right to his affection, but he left these things unsaid.

"This is your land," Rob Jenner said, "but you must make a decision now."

Quartermain nodded and looked at Jane Beal. She was crying, the tears blending with the softly falling rain. "You have no home here," he said. "You have nothing coming. It's in my mind to take you to Brownwood to the sheriff, but that will get us nothing. Tomorrow I'll come to town and I'll have papers for you to sign. You don't have to sign if you want to fight, but I'll tell you this, Jane. I'll work the rest of my life to keep you from ever setting foot on Izee Beal's property again."

There was no more for her here. She had placed the blue chips on the table, seen the cards fall, and lost; tears of defeat were not in her. She turned and splashed through the mud to her buggy, then drove out.

When she was gone Quartermain said, "Rob, we've got a mess on our hands. The bank will go into receivership until an auditor comes down from Brownwood and clears it. There might be some foreclosures on people around here, but we can co-sign that paper and keep them floating. Are you with me or against me?"

"Does this mean that you'll have your fence?"

"Fences and shorthorns," Quartermain said flatly. He looked at Parker Jenner. "Boy, you've got the burn in the palms of your hands, and there won't be room for you on a range where men no longer carry a gun. There's a place in Arizona called Tombstone that's wide open. Get on your horse and go there, where they have what you want."

Parker Jenner looked at his father for a moment. The old man said, "I'm tired of killings, boy. Do what he says if you can't behave."

"Damn country's getting too tame for me," Parker said, and walked to his horse. The old man watched him mount up and ride out. On Rob Jenner's face there was regret, but he had to make his concession to the changing times.

[*Turn page*]

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Rob sighed and said, "I'd be obliged if you'd cart me home, fellers. I'd like my own bed." He touched Quartermain. "Your place is gone. Until you build again, I'd consider it neighborly if you and your woman stayed with me."

"I'll be over, then," Quartermain said, and nodded to one of his men, who mounted and pulled the travois out of the yard. Bushrod followed his father into the rainy night and Cherokee walked away, looking at the damage.

CARRIE HOLDERMAN stood by Jim Quartermain. She said, "I hated to do that, Jim. I wanted you for my own, but not that way."

"Then why?"

"Because she had gotten away with so much, Jim. All her life she's gotten away with everything. She used you from the start, because she wanted to—what's the use? I just couldn't see her get away with this too. I'm sorry. I wasn't big enough."

"You've answered so many questions for me, Carrie," Quartermain said. "She had that way about her of making a man feel that he could never do enough for her, that he had to give her everything." He laughed softly: "I never owed her anything, Carrie. All this time that I've been thinking I did, I didn't owe her one damn thing, did I?"

"No, Jim."

He looked around at his ranch, seeing the smouldering ruins, the stampeded horses gathering in the night near the gutted barn, but the sight of this did not sadden him too much.

Quartermain said, "This is the price I have to pay for peace, Carrie. I have to start all over, from the bottom." He looked at her then. "Do you start with me?"

"Yes, Jim. I'll always be with you."

"I have my place near Crystal City to sell," he said, mentally adding his assets. "That'll be enough cash to carry us and to start another house. I'd like to build it away from the cottonwoods this time—maybe nearer the road."

Cherokee Nye came up then, his boots softly sucking at the mud. He said, "She's a total loss, Jim, except for the cattle and the fence. You're burned out to the ground."

"Only the buildings," Quartermain said. "We still got a crew?"

"Two dead, and Acky's got a bullet in his leg. What do you want me to do? They can't sleep out in the rain."

"We'll use Jenner's place until we build again," Quartermain said.

Cherokee grunted and thought this over. "That going to work? There was bad feeling between Running W and Long Knife and it isn't going to wash away with the rain."

"Sooner or later they'll have to learn to enter the same room without fighting," Quartermain stated. "Now's a good time to start."

"Uh," Cherokee said by way of agreement. "This country sure's been shot to hell in a hurry."

"It's been cleaned out," Quartermain corrected in that mild voice he used when he wanted his undisputed way. "There'll be no more sidearms carried in the San Saba, Cherokee. A saddle gun is all right, but no more pistols. Shooters aren't welcome here."

"I see," Cherokee said, and glanced at the Remington in Jim Quartermain's holster. "When's this starting?"

"Now," he said, and lifted the gun. He turned it over several times and said, "Cherokee, a man worked on this for me, to make it better than another man's guns. But it's all a lie. McKitrich had a set of Colts with no front sights and flat hammers and the actions smooth as silk, but he died. No gun is better than any other, Cherokee. They're all junk."

HE ARCED the pistol away from him and watched it land in the mud. A timber inside the house parted and allowed one side to fall in. The fire had not completely carried through the parlor. Two walls remained, as well as half the porch.

"See if you can find a wagon," he said. "We'll take Acky to Jenners' and send someone in for the doctor."

Cherokee walked away, a vague bobbing shape in the night. There was no more light from the burning buildings now, just the bed of sizzling coals that slowly went out beneath the sifting rain.

A break appeared in the clouds, and a sliver

of moon shone down on them. Quartermain put his arm around Carrie, and she came against him.

He said, "You've got a lot to forget, Carrie. Can you do it?"

"Yes," she said. "It will be no trouble at all."

He found that his cigars were ruined; the rain had soaked through his coat. "McKitrick wanted it like this," he said, "but it never happened for him. He dreamed and nothing came of it. I don't want that, Carrie."

"It won't be like that," she said. "He wanted to change, but he wanted to do it the easy way. It won't be easy." She smiled and stood up on her toes to kiss him.

Cherokee came back leading a team hitched to the spring wagon. Acky was in the back, lying on a pallet of dirty blankets. Quartermain helped Carrie to the wet seat, then leaned over the sideboards and said, "How's it going, boy?"

Acky grinned past the set of his jaw. "Do me a favor, boss, and miss the bumps."

Quartermain climbed onto the seat and lifted the reins. "I like a smooth ride myself," he said, and clucked to the team.

Carrie sat close to him, her arm around him and her head against his shoulder. They moved slowly across the flats toward the fence line. There was no hurry now; tomorrow they would begin to build and, in Quartermain's mind, tomorrow was no longer uncertain, as his yesterdays had been.

THE END.

## KNOW YOUR WEST

*(Answers to the questions on page 89)*

1. Angora goats have twins more often than singles.
2. Montana.
3. Walla Walla.
4. That he has been stealing somebody else's calves.
5. St. Paul and Minneapolis, Minn.
6. Twins.
7. North Dakota and South Dakota.
8. Texas.
9. No.
10. Yes, almost always.

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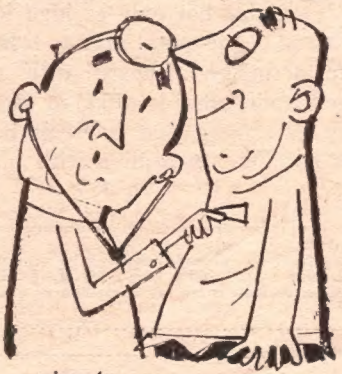

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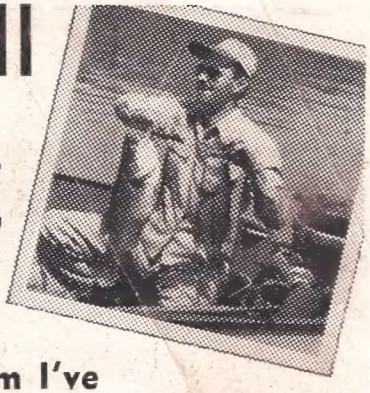

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